



What to Know About Warming Up & Stretching

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There are two major areas to keep in mind when beginning every exercise bout. The first is to warm-up your body. The second is stretching your muscles. A proper warm-up literally heats up muscle tissue. Warming-up allows blood flow to increase in the muscle area. The increase of blood brings along excess oxygen to the muscle, allowing the muscle to work more efficiently through the beginning stages of exercise. Stretching is important to prevent injury during exercise. If muscles are too short, not stretched, joints in the body are not able to move through a proper range of motion. During exercise, these joints may be forced to move past the range of motion in a non-stretched muscle. Sprains, strains, and even tearing of a muscle occur.

How often should I do a warm-up and stretch?

Stretching is not only important to do in connection with an exercise bout, but should be done every day. Therefore, in order to prevent injury during stretching, a warm-up should be done along with every stretching session. Daily stretching improves flexibility in the body, keeps the muscles from continually shortening and, most importantly, improves posture. The spine will be more in alignment, joints will move more freely and with less pain, and risk for hip injury when elderly is reduced.

What do I do first?

Always begin a workout with the warm-up. Increasing the temperature of the muscle relaxes the fibers and allows for easier stretching. A proper warm-up should last for five to ten minutes. A warm-up generally concentrates on large muscle areas, such as, the legs, back and arms.

Move slowly at first and gradually increase through the warm-up. The warm-up should increase your heart rate, but you should not begin to sweat. The last few minutes of a warm-up should be designated to stretching. Typical warm-up activities include walking, light bike riding, jumping jacks, and small circles with wrists, ankles, arms and legs.

What should I consider when stretching?

When connected to an exercise workout, stretching should occur at two points during an exercise workout. The first stretching should be done at the end of the warm-up. The second stretching should occur at the end of the workout. During both stretching sessions, concentrate on muscles that are used during the workout, but try to stretch as many muscles as possible. When stretching is done on its own, begin with large muscle groups such as back, stomach, leg, and upper arm muscles. Move progressively to areas like wrists, ankles and neck. Always begin a stretching session with a warm-up.

Remember to keep a balance when stretching. This means if the back muscles are stretched, the stomach muscles also need to be stretched. In this case, if the stomach muscles are not stretched, they begin to pull causing the spine to round over.

Stretching a muscle should not cause pain. If you feel pain, back off a little until you feel slightly uncomfortable but not in pain. Hold the stretch in this area. Each stretch should be held for approximately 30 seconds.

Never bounce in a stretch. Bouncing causes a natural reflex in the muscle. The muscle contracts and when stretched again, due to the repetitive bouncing, results in pulling or tearing.