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STRETCHING FOR DUMMIES (AND THE REST OF US TOO!)

WHY STRETCH

The soft tissues in the body (especially muscles and joint capsules) adapt to the movement required of them. The more you move your muscles and joints through full range, the more flexibility you will have. Conversely, the less you require your muscles and joints to move, the stiffer you get. The saying USE IT OR LOSE IT is true in this case.

The North American posture and life habits are such that the average person develops a classical pattern of muscle tightness and joint restrictions. This pattern of tightness then contributes to related postural pain patterns and cumulative trauma disorders.

The North American lifestyle is also such that few people escape from signs of stress. How many of us don't dream of a good neck massage after a tough day at work?!

Stretching exercises are a PREVENTION measure to reduce the tightness and tension in the soft tissues before they become a chronic problem. Preventative stretching maintains or improves the flexibility of muscles and joints. Stretching also helps to reduce the signs of tension and promote relaxation. In addition, general stretches are also used prior to and after physical workouts to prepare the body for the work out and to relax and lengthen the soft tissues after the work out.

If you have not been stretching to prevent loss of flexibility, then your soft tissues may have tightened to a point that they are causing strain on other muscles and joints. If stretches have not been used as a prevention measure, then stretches may be necessary as TREATMENT techniques to restore flexibility and reduce the strain the tight tissue are causing on your body. Plantar fasciitis, tennis elbow, hip arthritis and back pain are all common pain complaints that can be caused by tight soft tissues.

WHO SHOULD STRETCH

Everyone would benefit from a general stretching program. Your job or recreational activities may dictate certain stretches that you may need to concentrate on, but a general stretching program is a beneficial preventative measure for each one of us. If you are not sure what stretches to follow, a physiotherapist can help you.

Note: If you have suffered recent physical trauma you should seek professional advice on restrictions you should follow in a stretching program.

WHEN TO STRETCH

A complete general stretching program being followed for preventative reasons can be done in about 10 minutes. And it may be that you can fit some of the stretches into your daily routine and don't have to set aside extra time to do them. You should try to do a general stretching routine about 3 times a week. Its best not to do the stretches first thing in the morning, give your body a chance to move around before doing your stretches.

A pre and post workout stretch can be done in about 5 minutes just before and just after you exercise or play a sport. If you don't include all the general stretches in the work out stretches, then make sure you do the missed stretches at another time.

Isolated stretches, for example, to ward off the effects of local tension, can be done anytime you feel like it and as often as you need to. The stretches are often subtle techniques and a 30 to 60 second stretch can make a big difference to the rest of your day.

If you have a tight muscle or joint that you are targeting to gain flexibility, then that one stretch should take you 2 to 3 minutes and should be followed daily.

HOW TO STRETCH

Stretching is easy to learn, but, there is a right way and a wrong way to stretch. The right way is a relaxed, sustained stretch with your attention focused on the muscle being stretched. The wrong way is to bounce up and down or to stretch to the point of pain – these methods can actually do more harm than good.

When you begin a stretch, spend 10 – 30 seconds in the easy stretch. Go to the point where you feel a mild tension and relax as you hold the stretch. Make sure you are not straining other part of your body. The easy stretch reduces muscle tightness and readies the tissues for the developmental stretch.

To improve flexibility, you must stretch a little further than you did in the easy stretch. The stretch should be slow, sustained 2 or 3 minutes and you should feel tension but not pain. The tension should diminish as you hold the stretch and you can stretch a little further as the tension decreases.

Muscles and soft tissue stretch more easily if warm, so consider stretching after applying heat or after a light warm up (e.g. a brisk warm)

DO NOT HOLD YOUR BREATH when you stretch. Your breathing should be slow, rhythmical and under control.