

FEATURE ARTICLE:
TO STRETCH OR **NOT** TO STRETCH?

PART II

In part I of our two part series on stretching and flexibility, we discussed the difference between stretching and flexibility, and talked about how to differentiate between the two. I also pretty clearly stated (at least I think I did) that stretching was a non-negotiable in any sound fitness or sports-training program.

In this article I will provide, as promised, some guidelines for stretching and principles for improving your flexibility for maximum health and performance.

First things first...

Though I wholeheartedly embrace stretching as an important part of a sound program, I do believe it is important to understand that there are different types of stretching exercises and there is a best time and occasion to use each type. I will be discussing the role of static and dynamic flexibility because they are the ones which will be typically used in both the fitness and sports contexts.

Static stretching exercises are typically those which are held for a pre-determined period of time (ex: 10-15 seconds). This is the most common type of stretching that you'll observe – most typically in the fitness, health, and wellness settings. You also most likely use this type of stretching in your particular program.

Dynamic stretching exercises are not quite as common in the fitness setting, but instead are more prominent in the sports-training arena. These stretches don't always look like stretches but are accomplishing the same purpose as static stretches, just in a different way. They will incorporate controlled movement in an attempt to stretch the muscle and provide some higher-level stress on the joints that the muscles support. This potentially increases athlete readiness for high levels of activity beyond what you might see in the general health/fitness setting. It also has the potential to reduce injuries from such activities.

I endorse the use of both types of stretching, but I do have guidelines for the use of each because different goals will require different types of stretching.

Some guidelines for improving **general health and fitness** are the following:

- I will incorporate a static stretching routine **following** the general warm-up activity – such as walking, cycling, light jogging or swimming. A warm muscle stretches much further than a cold one...Always warm-up before performing static stretching.
- Keep in mind that static stretching following the warm-up and prior to the actual exercise session is not used for the purpose of increasing flexibility, but instead to increase readiness for higher levels of physical activity.
- Following the exercise session and a short cool-down activity such as what was performed in the warm-up, static stretching would again be performed...this time with the purpose of improving flexibility and possibly helping to improve muscle recovery from the exercise session.



- Guidelines for static stretching
 - After warm-up
 - 1 set of stretching for each major muscle group (approximately 8-10 stretches will do)
 - Each stretch held for 10-15 seconds
 - Stretch to the point of mild discomfort
 - After cool-down
 - 1-3 sets of stretching for each major muscle group
 - Each stretch held for 30-60 seconds (or longer if you prefer)
 - Stretch to the point of mild discomfort
 - Trouble areas should receive 2-3 sets of stretching for at least 60 seconds per stretch

Some guidelines for improving **athletic readiness and performance** are the following:

- I will incorporate a dynamic stretching routine following a general warm-up or sport-specific readiness drills. In some cases, it will actually be combined with some general or specific warm-up activities and used as the warm-up, depending upon my goals for the day and the athlete.
- When performing dynamic stretching, the goal is to have the athlete physically ready for near-maximal levels of effort...activities such as speed and agility work, or for weight training or other total-body conditioning activities.
- There is no need to perform dynamic stretching exercises following the workout, since this is a time for the muscles to return to resting levels. Static stretching is preferable at this time using the guidelines previously mentioned.
- Guidelines for dynamic stretching
 - 1 – 2 sets of stretching exercises addressing one or several muscle groups at one time (there may be anywhere between 5 – 10 of these stretches in your routine depending upon which exercises you choose)
 - Controlled bouncing or moving is recommended in order to provide the type of stress on the joints which will improve athlete readiness for type of activity that is to follow – Remember though, that the point of mild discomfort is still the goal, not pain.

I hope this helps you on your quest for optimal health, wellness, or performance. If you have any questions, please email me at cburrage@2goodhealthllc.com and I'll be glad to respond to your questions within 48 hours.