



Moore Health Physiotherapy Explains: Stretching and Flexibility

In the world of flexibility we are not all born equal! Genetics, injuries and abnormal body mechanics all have a role to play in how flexible we are. As we age, our muscles tend to tighten and our range of motion decreases, so it is not unusual for us to one day 'discover' that everyday objects (like our toes) seem to be a lot further away than they used to! Luckily, there *is* something that we can do that is simple, free and very convenient, that will certainly help us — *stretching!*

Isn't Stretching Only Important If You Play Sport?

No! Stretching assists us in all aspects of our movement. Regardless of your age, fitness level, degree of flexibility or sporting prowess, it is very important to incorporate some basic stretching into your daily routine. By incorporating a stretching programme into your regular fitness routine you can help yourself to maintain a maximum range of motion *and* you will be taking proactive steps in preventing future injury. This is because those muscle/tendon groups that have a greater range of motion passively are much less likely to experience tears when used actively — such as when we go for a walk, play sport, lift a heavy object or suddenly reach out to grab something that is falling.

Some other benefits of stretching include:

- Reduced muscle tension
- Increased co-ordination
- Increased circulation
- Enhanced feelings of mental and physical relaxation/wellbeing
- Reduced risk of injury to joints, muscles, and tendons

There are lots of simple stretches you can do whilst you are watching TV, sitting at the computer, or getting ready for bed — so you don't have to "set aside" a special time in order to incorporate a good range of stretching into your normal activities!

Starting Out

To ensure your stretching routine is a safe routine, it is imperative to consult your physiotherapist, or other qualified health practitioner, prior to commencing any stretch routine, particularly if you:

- Are a novice at stretching or are returning to a routine after an extended break
- Have a chronic condition or injury
- Experience pain upon any movement
- Experience sudden and/or unexplained muscle tightness of any kind

Tips for Safe Stretching

- Remember that stretching is *not* exercise and your body's flexibility will vary from day to day, so listen to your body and be guided by how the stretch is feeling – you don't need to push it!
- Keep it gentle and focus on achieving a pain-free stretch.
- Warm up a little bit prior to stretching — cold muscles aren't very supple. Begin with gradual mobility exercises of all joints such as rolling your neck, wrists or ankles, and bending your arms and legs. If you are stretching prior to commencing exercise, five minutes of slow jogging or jogging on the spot will also assist in warming up your muscles.
- Breathe freely as you hold each stretch; try not to hold your breath.
- Don't bounce or hold a painful stretch. Whilst you can expect to feel some muscle tension while you're stretching, if you feel pain, you've gone too far. If you experience pain, decrease the stretch until you no longer feel any pain.
- Target major muscle groups and those muscles and joints that you use most frequently in your everyday routine. For example, if you sit at a desk in your professional life, don't forget to stretch your neck and back regularly; if you have just been for a run, your calves, thighs, hips, hamstring and lower back might be your main concentration areas.
- Hold each stretch for at least 30 seconds. It takes time to lengthen tissues safely. Don't forget to repeat the stretch on the other side.

I Stretch Regularly But My Muscles Remain Tight!

When we experience unexplained muscle tightness our first reaction is often to just try and 'stretch it out'. Unfortunately if this muscle tightness has been caused by the muscle group 'tightening' or 'spasming' in order to protect another injury to the body, stretching will not only **not relieve** the tightness but it also may cause **further damage** to the original injury. If your stretching routine is not resulting in any progress, a professional assessment by a suitably qualified health practitioner is essential to managing any potential injury and getting your stretching routine back on track.