

# STRETCHING

## What is stretching?

In the context of health and fitness, to stretch means to deliberately lengthen a muscle. For example, leaning forward and touching your toes (or the action of) while sitting with your legs out straight in front of you will cause your hamstrings (back of your legs) to lengthen.

## Why do we stretch?

Stretching is a commonly overlooked, but very useful aspect of training. Whether you are a full-time athlete, beginner or somewhere in between, the long list of benefits associated with stretching can have a positive impact on your training. In my experience, the benefits of stretching include, but are not limited to:

- increased flexibility,
- better muscle condition,
- burning calories,
- releasing toxins, and
- prevention of injury.

I have found that stretching can certainly take your health and fitness to the next level in a short amount of time. For example, a small amount of extra stretching can lead to improved muscle condition and flexibility, which in turn generates greater range of movement and more efficient muscle contraction.

## Why does it matter to me?

If you are a sedentary individual (meaning you never or infrequently train), this can mean your muscles are deconditioned. The term “deconditioned” means a lot of things. One of them is that your muscle fibres do not stretch or contract as efficiently or effectively as someone who trains regularly. It is only too common that a new fitness enthusiast - shortly after embarking on a new healthy lifestyle - has had to stop due to a crunchy knee or an aching shoulder or neck. This can be quite easily avoided with stretching the right muscles, providing the individual is not predisposed to a chronic injury or unseen biomechanical dysfunction.

## EDUCATION

---

### What muscles do you stretch and how?

The muscles that you choose to stretch will depend on what it is you are trying to achieve. For example, during injury rehabilitation you will usually stretch the damaged or weak muscle tissue as well as the surrounding support group.

For general flexibility, you can stretch as many muscles as you feel necessary. Here is a basic set of rules I get my clients to follow when stretching:

- Start at the lowest muscle. For example, if stretching your legs, start with your feet and calves.
- Ease into the stretched position - do not rush into it. Apply pressure slowly and gradually increase this as you relax into the stretch. Remember, you are trying stretch your muscles, not tear them.
- Don't push too hard. If you are stretching yourself to tears you may be doing more damage than good.

- Always stretch both sides of your body, and do so for an even amount of time (e.g. 20-30 seconds on each side).

I have included my recommended lower and upper body stretch routines on pages 84 and 85, respectively. For step-by-step instructions on how to do each of these stretches, see the pages 176 to 188 of the exercise glossary.

