York University Staff Association Health and Wellness News and Views

It's a beautiful Saturday morning and you decide to go out for a jog. You bend over to tie your running shoes, head outside, and do your usual two-minute stretching routine. You prop a foot up and bend forward to stretch your hamstring, then you press that heel back for a calf stretch. You jump up and down a few times to get your blood moving, and then off you go! Wrong!!!

Studies have shown that much of what we believed to be beneficial about proper stretching techniques may actually have the opposite effect.

You should never stretch a cold muscle in any way. Doing static stretches, (meaning the kind where you hold a stretch for several seconds) should never be done before a workout. This will decrease your strength, power, performance and my even lead to injury. However Dynamic Stretching which uses movement, momentum and active muscular effort to bring about a stretch will increase flexibility and possibly lower the incidence of injury.

It's important to warm up your body before any physical activity. Warming up goes a long way toward preparing the body for exercising, both physically and mentally. It increases your heart and respiratory rate, boosts the amount of nutrients and oxygen delivered to your muscles, prepares the body for a demanding workout, makes it easier to burn calories, and extend your workout.

The term "warm-up" describes many light-aerobic and cardiovascular activities, which are separate from stretching. (Stretching works best when performed after warming up.) When you warm up, you are literally warming up the temperature of both your body and your muscles.

There are many benefits to adding stretching to your daily routine. Stretching releases stress, assists with posture, improves balance, flexibility and the performance of everyday activities.

Here are a few tips to incorporate into your stretching routine. After you have warmed up sufficiently , of course.

How Hard?

There should be nothing hard about stretching. This is the time to relax and enjoy. Each stretch should cause your muscle to feel comfortably stretched but not distressed. Never force a stretch, and never stretch so far that you feel pain, allow muscles to feel slightly uncomfortable. With practice and patience, flexibility will increase.

How Long?

Take your time and gently ease into each stretch. Try to hold the stretch for 30-40 seconds. Take a moment to rest between stretches. Be aware of your breathing. Never hold your breath. Breathe naturally throughout each stretch.

How Often?

Gaining flexibility is primarily about discipline. The key to gaining flexibility is simply to stretch often. If you do not stretch, or do so only sporadically, your gains in flexibility will be limited. To improve your flexibility, you should stretch once a day, short, repeated exposure to stretching is more productive than a single intense or long bout of stretching. For

example, it is far better to stretch ten minutes per day, every day, than to stretch 70 minutes once a week. Stretching is also a long-term commitment and must be continued indefinitely to maintain and/or increase flexibility.

Consider Yoda.

If you are familiar with the yoga basics you can incorporate any of those moves as dynamic stretches before a power walk, a run or even a long bike ride. Try a few minutes of sun salutations before you workout that will allow you to warm up well stretching multiple parts of the body at the same time. Or make downward dog a dynamic stretch by pedaling your feet or lifting alternating legs.

Everyone can learn to stretch, regardless of age or flexibility. Stretching feels GOOD! In addition to that good feeling, a consistent stretching program will produce large gains in flexibility, joint movement and an all around great feeling! Be kind to your muscles and they will be kind to you.

If you have any questions, comments, or contributions to our newsletter please email Kerrianne Brown at kerribr@yorku.ca .

Kerrianne Brown   February 10, 2012