

The Benefits of Stretching

There has been a fair bit of debate in recent years about whether or not stretching helps to prevent sport specific injuries. There is still some divided opinion on this issue. Notwithstanding this, there are still some very good reasons for why stretching remains an important part of most general fitness and sport training programs.

Stretching increases the range of motion at your joints and enhances your flexibility. This means that you can move particular limbs or stretch particular muscles further before you feel any strain or before particular types of over extension injuries may occur.

Regular and systematic stretching also helps to keep muscles supple and balanced. This can prevent general or localised tightness and can positively contribute to good posture. Good posture is important for the prevention of discomfort or injuries that may come with muscle imbalances or tightness.

Further, stretching increases the blood flow to the muscles being stretched. This increased blood flow helps to nourish the muscles, rid the muscles of waste by-products and improve muscle recovery time.

Finally, the act of stretching can be relaxing in itself and this can help reduce tension and stress – physically and/or emotionally or mentally.

So, there are plenty of good reasons for why stretching should be incorporated into most fitness and sport training programs.

Stretching Essentials

- **Warm up first** - walk or jog/walk for 5-10 minutes before stretching. This warm up will help to increase the blood flow through the body, raise body temperature and reduce the risk of pulling or straining cold muscles.
- **Stretch gently and hold for 20-30 seconds** – it takes time and care to stretch or lengthen muscles safely. Go slowly and when you reach the point of muscle tension hold it for 20-30 seconds.
- **Relax** – Don't burst into stretching, bounce or hold your breath. Breathe normally throughout.
- **No pain** - if you feel pain when stretching then you have stretched too far. Reduce the extent of the stretch until there is no pain, just tension.
- **Repeat** - to maximise the benefit of stretching repeat each stretch 2-3 times. You will most likely find that you are able to stretch further on the second and third attempts and thereby further increase the range of joint motion and flexibility, and the benefits that come with them.
- **Cool down** – as well as stretching after your warm up and before your work out, stretch at the end of your training session as part of your cool down.

If you stretch regularly and carefully you will reap the fitness and sport training benefits of stretching as well as enjoy the stretching for the relaxing exercise it can be in itself.