

## **Stretches: What to Watch for...**

Many people remember the old days of stretching prior to doing any exercising. This is stretching a cold muscle, which is WRONG! Scientists have found that stretching a cold muscle is damaging. It is like pulling apart a rubber band that has been sitting in the sun for several days. The rubber band will snap, rip, or break, as do our muscles.

The only acceptable method is warming-up prior to any type of physical activity. Generally speaking you should warm-up for 10-20 minutes, stretch for 10-20 minutes, participate in your activity, cool-down for 10-20 minutes, then stretch again for 10-20 minutes. This is not very realistic for most of us. Thus, the recommendation is to do some sort of cardiovascular activity to warm-up your body, get the blood flowing into your muscles; participate in your activity; cool-down so your heart rate drops into your resting heart rate zone; and then stretch.

There are several stretches that athletes should not be doing due to the damaging effects on joints, ligaments, tendons, and muscle fibers.

First, only allow "Static" stretching. Static stretching allows for the muscles to gradually increase in length, in a gentle fashion. These stretches should be held for 30 seconds (minimally). "Static" stretching is "stationary" & "safe".

"Ballistic Stretching" is not stretching. This occurs when the athlete is moving or bouncing body parts/muscles during the "stretch". When muscles are in motion, they are working; shortening and lengthening as needed; blood is flowing. There is not a gentle lengthening when using "ballistic Stretching". This kind of "stretching" is not appropriate and is unsafe. To remember the difference use, "Ballistic", Bouncing", "Bad".

There are many different ways to tell if a stretch is safe or not.

- Is it compromising any joint: putting that joint in an unnatural position; putting undue to stress on the joint; or if it feels like it is pulling?
- Is the joint being hyper-extended: “locking”; depressed; out sideways; or bent in an unnatural fashion?
- Is it placing your body out of alignment?
- Is it requiring you to push on a body part? (You should never use your hands to push on a muscle or a knee, as it puts undue stress on that joint and may cause injury).
- Is it putting your head lower than your heart? (You want your blood flowing and you do not want to constrict your airway/breathing).
- Is it moving, bouncing, swaying, etc?
- Is it creating your back to become rounded, rather than staying flat?
- Are you reaching for your toes or the ground rather than moving your chest forward, keeping your back straight?
- Is there a balance issue? Do you have to hop around, wobble, or tip over to keep the position? (That would be considered “Ballistic Stretching”, which is BAD).
- Is it claiming to stretch more than two major muscle groups at the same time? (Too complicated, which will cause the body to be out of alignment).
- Does it hurt? Is it painful? Does it feel like it is pulling or straining? (Remember, a stretch is a gentle lengthening of the muscle and should not hurt).

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, then the “stretch” is **NOT** appropriate or good for you, and may cause injury or damage. Please think of the long-term effects. You may not see the damages until 20, 30, 40 years down the line, but consider this, do you want to be the one to cause that injury when there was a safer, more effective way to stretch? It is better to be overly cautious than do controversial stretches.

Always, always, consult an expert in the field. We are not talking about a “personal trainer” from 24-hour Fitness or Gold’s gym, since they do not have to have a degree in that position and their so-called training is not sufficient nor reliable. A professional or an expert would include an Exercise Kinesiologist, Exercise Physiologist; Physical Therapist; or Kinesiologist who is current in their research and practices. There are others as well, but be sure to review their background, their education, their practices, philosophies, and always apply the previously mentioned questions to what they are telling you.