

STRETCHING: The Most Important Part of Fitness

Most of us have played the part of "Weekend Warrior" and gotten injured, or know someone who has. Transitioning from an inactive to an active lifestyle may result in soreness and stiffness. This can not only be discouraging, but can result in injury. Whether you are the "Weekend Warrior" or a seasoned athlete, stretching is an essential part of any sports activity and can lessen the chances of an injury occurring.

Experts agree, whenever you start a new activity, you should do so with moderation. Gary Souza, a Physical Therapist who has been providing quality care since 1981, will tell you that proper flexibility is the most important step in obtaining proper function. If your goal is to gain strength, improve your game, or feel healthier, your first action should be to initiate a flexibility program.

The tissues that hold our bodies together, connective tissues, are the most important to stretch. Restriction in connective tissue mobility can disrupt the function of the body's organs and systems. Connective tissues can become tight by lack of motion/inactivity, trauma that results in the formation of scar tissue, or through the course of various connective tissue diseases (fibromyalgia, rheumatoid arthritis, psoriasis, SLE). A common source of tightness in adolescence is from the rapid growth of bone during "growth spurts." While bones can increase in length, connective tissues that make up muscles may not keep the same pace. Therefore, if a young athlete was flexible last season, the next season could be a different situation.

The nice feature of our connective tissues is that they have the ability to adapt. While they can shorten through the processes just described, they can also be elongated. The key to restoring flexibility is slow and prolonged stretching. Never forcing the tissues is an important thing to remember, as connective tissues are capable of tearing. Think of stretching your tissues as stretching a piece of salt water taffy. A quick pull and you can snap the taffy in two. However, a slow, prolonged and gentle force will result in the taffy elongation.

Souza, who covers several of the local high school football programs including 12 years at Bishop Amat, says you must remember that connective tissues will respond to the amount of stresses we put upon them. Therefore, in order to maintain flexibility, you must consistently perform your stretches, or your tissues will shorten. Keep this in mind if you are resuming an activity after a period of inactivity.

The following are a group of stretching exercises that will stretch various muscle groups. These are general stretches that will help to restore and maintain flexibility. They are not sport or injury specific and other specific stretches may also be required. You should consult a physical therapist or your physician should you have any prolonged soreness following any physical or stretching activity.

Tips for performing stretches correctly

- Be concerned with the quality, not the quantity of the stretch. It is better to perform a few repetitions correctly, than several incorrectly.
- Relax! A contracted muscle cannot be stretched and may tear.
- Hold each stretch for about 20 seconds, never bounce.
- Don't over stretch. If you are stretching correctly, you will feel a comfortable pull, not an annoying pain.
- Perform these stretches five times each and at least three times per week and always before and after an activity.

Gary Souza, owner of Gary M. Souza, PT and Associates says, remember that gaining flexibility takes time. If you have been inactive for a long period, it may take several weeks to regain lost flexibility. An adolescent that is growing should stretch at least every other day. Maintaining flexibility during growth of bones may help prevent postural problems that can result in serious back injuries later in life. If you have any question about the above stretching exercises or require sport or injury specific stretches, contact Gary M. Souza, PT and Associates... (909)861-3511.

DISCLAIMER: The following stretches/exercises are intended for people with no known injuries and /or disabilities. All stretches and strengthening exercises should not be completed before consulting your physician.

Thigh Stretches

Standing Hamstring Stretch

- Place heel on a stool or bleachers with toes pointing up.
- Keep other foot facing forward. Bend at hips keeping back straight until you feel a comfortable stretch in the back of the leg.

Standing Quadriceps Stretch

- Pull heel up toward buttock. Do not arch back or lean forward, keep knees together.
- Pull heel up until you feel a comfortable stretch in the front of the leg.

Calf Stretches

Gastroc Stretch

- Stand with one foot in front of the other. Bend the front knee.
- Keeping the back leg straight, with heel turned slightly outward, lean into wall until a stretch is felt in the calf.
- Be sure not to arch your back and do not bounce.

Soleus Stretch

- Stand with one leg in front of the other
- Bend both knees, gently lean into wall until a stretch is felt in the lower calf of the back leg.
- Keep both feet facing forward, do not bounce.

Groin & Hip Flexor Stretches

Hip Flexor Stretch

- Lunge forward
- Slowly push pelvis forward until a stretch is felt in front of hip in the back leg.

Groin Stretch

- Stand with feet a little more than shoulder width apart with feet facing forward.
- Lean your body toward the bent knee until you feel a stretch in the inner side of your thigh.
- Avoid leaning forward and keep back straight.