Northwest Healthcare Center

Stretching: Good or Bad?

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This is a question I get on a regular basis. Should I be stretching? The answer is not a simple, yes or no. There are a lot of factors that need to be taken into consideration before making such a blanket statement that stretching is good or bad.

I would first like to address what you are trying to accomplish from the stretch. Are you trying to "stay loose" or is your intent to truly lengthen the muscle from the stretch? If staying loose or being more flexible is your goal then it is not about stretching every muscle, it is about targeting the right areas for each individual. Also, stretching should be performed to correct asymmetry. The most important areas to maintain flexibility are the hips, ankles and shoulders. The area that needs more stability than flexibility would be the low back, so please, don't reach down and touch your toes. If the intent is to lengthen the muscle, then it is important to make sure that the muscle is not tight because it is weak. A good example of this is the hamstrings. Everyone wants to stretch their hamstrings, but I find that most of the time their hamstrings are tight because they are weak. Once their hamstrings are strengthened the normal range of motion is restored without any stretching. This goes for every joint in the body. The more muscle balance you have around a joint, the better range of motion that joint will have. This ultimately leads to the most optimal position for the joint so it can function without injury and improved performance. Another reason to be cautious while stretching is if there is pain involved. This can be due to nerve tension and you will not be able to stretch the pain away. This will more than likely make your pain worse and could prolong it.

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There was a recent study on the website of USA Track and Field, the sport's national governing body, which involved 1400 runners who were assigned to two groups. The first group did not stretch before their runs, but maintained their normal workout routine: same mileage and warm-up minus any stretching. The second group performed a series of simple static stretching before running. This regimen was maintained for 3 months and the goal was to see if the stretching prevented injury. The results of the study showed that static stretching proved to be a wash in terms of protecting against injury.

This study gives us another aspect of stretching to talk about: static vs. dynamic stretching. Static stretching is performed by holding a stretch for a specific amount of time; this is the type of stretch most of us are familiar with. Although popular, studies show that static stretching provokes a reflex that prevents the muscle from being stretched too much. This stretch reflex is protecting the muscles and joints from damage and in turn induces the muscle to become tighter. Static stretching has also been linked to affecting performance in sports if done before the activity. Again, I will use the hamstrings as an example. Using a static stretch for your hamstrings before an athletic event can actually decrease your performance because your hamstrings are your springs for jumping and running. For these reasons above I prefer dynamic stretching over static. Dynamic stretching are exercises that increase the range of motion of your joints via constant movement and more importantly, it does not invoke the stretch reflex that I addressed earlier.

So, is stretching good or bad? I again say that any stretching regimen should be tailored to the individual. If you do any static stretching it should be performed after any athletic event and should not provoke pain. If you are not sure what you should and should not be stretching, schedule an appointment to find out what is right for you.

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