



Flexible Benefits

We take part in aerobic activity to improve our cardiovascular endurance and burn fat. We weight train to maintain lean muscle and build strength. Those are the two most important elements of a fitness program, right?

Actually, there are three important elements. Often neglected is **flexibility training**. That neglect is regrettable, because flexibility training:

- ◆ Allows greater freedom of movement and improved posture;
- ◆ Increases physical and mental relaxation;
- ◆ Releases muscle tension and soreness; and
- ◆ Reduces the risk of injury.

Some people are naturally more flexible. Flexibility is primarily due to one's genetics, gender, age and level of physical activity. As we grow older, we tend to lose flexibility, usually as a result of inactivity rather than the aging process itself. As with cardiovascular endurance and muscle strength, **flexibility will improve** with regular training or **decrease** with inactivity.

Stretch For Success

Before stretching, take some time to warm up as stretching cold muscles can cause injury. Begin with a simple, low intensity warm up, such as easy walking or jogging while swinging the arms in a wide circle. Spend at least 5 minutes warming up prior to stretching. Make sure that the stretching is **specific** to the tasks ahead.

When performing any stretch:

- ⇒ Start each stretch slowly, exhaling as you gently stretch the muscle.
- ⇒ Try to hold the stretch for **at least** 10 seconds (ideally 30 seconds).
- ⇒ Avoid 'bouncing' a stretch. There is less risk of injury when holding a stretch.
- ⇒ Avoid pushing or straining a muscle too far. If a stretch hurts, ease up.
- ⇒ Don't hold your breath.

Fitting Stretching into a Busy Schedule

Time constraints keep many people from stretching. Some complain they just don't have time to stretch; others hurry out of their fitness classes before the cool-down exercises are completed. Ideally, at least 15 minutes, three times per week, should be spent on flexibility training. But even a mere 5 minutes of stretching at the end of an exercise session is better than nothing.

Here are some tips for fitting stretching into a busy schedule:

1. Try doing a few stretches immediately after a shower or while soaking in a hot tub. The hot water elevates muscle temperature enough to make them more pliable and receptive to stretching.
2. Try a few simple stretches before getting out of bed in the morning. Wake yourself up with a few full-body stretches by pointing your toes and reaching your arms above your head.
3. Take a stretching class such as yoga or Tai chi. Scheduling a class will help you to stick with a regular stretching program.