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How to Become More Flexible and Why It's Important

By K. Aleisha Fetters

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Medically Reviewed by Nicole A. Solomos, DO



Why Flexibility Matters | How to Improve | Strength and Flexibility | Problems With Bending Q & A's

Bend down and touch your toes. Touching your toes, like all other bend-and-hold moves, requires our muscles to stretch.

"Flexibility is the amount of stretch that a given muscle allows," explains Bryant Walrod, MD, a sports medicine practitioner and assistant professor of clinical family medicine at The Ohio State University College of Medicine in Columbus.

Every muscle in our bodies is made up of long strands of muscle fibers, or cells, bunched together into progressively larger groups and ultimately wrapped in connective tissue called fascia. Our muscles, by design, contract (which allows you to do things like move or carry an object or push open a door) and also stretcl explains. And the opposing stretch is just as important as the contraction.

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your body's biomechanics, potentially leading to strain or stress on other parts of the body," Dr. Walrod says.

Eventually, a muscle that cannot sufficiently relax and stretch can limit our mobility.

Mobility is the ability for joints (where two or more bones meet) to move through their full and healthy range of motion without being restricted by other tissues like ligaments, tendons, or muscles. When mobility becomes limited because muscles are too tight, the ability to safely perform everyday tasks, as well as exercises ranging from running to strength training, diminishes, explains Adam Rivadeneyra, MD, a sports medicine physician with the Hoag Orthopedic Institute and Orthopaedic Specialty Institute in Orange County, California.

Think of a dancer who tries to kick her leg over her head without warming up first, or a pitcher who tries to throw a fastball as soon as he steps out of the locker room. Both are practically asking for an injury. If flexibility becomes severely limited, even everyday tasks (like bending over to pick up something you've dropped or lifting a suitcase) can similarly increase the risk of muscle strains and tears. This is especially true in older adults, as flexibility naturally declines as part of the aging process, Walrod explains.

"Flexibility helps you perform activities of daily living and self-maintenance as you age, like putting socks and shoes on, taking care of your foot health, and being able to wash yourself," adds Nicole Belkin, MD, an orthopedic surgeon at Columbia University Irving Medical Center in New York City.

What's more, it's important to remember that everything in your body is connected. So when one muscle gets too tight, it pulls on neighboring bones and muscles. And if one joint can't move like it should, other joints have to pick up the

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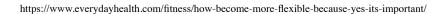
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The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) considers flexibility an important aspect of your health, despite a lack of research outlining its health benefits.^[1]

Stretching Habits for Mobility, Energy, and Relaxation

The simple pleasure of a good stretch may be the boost you need.

How to Improve Flexibility: The Different Types of Stretches



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If you're looking to increase your flexibility, Dr. Belkin recommends stretching three to five days a week for five minutes. Here are the types of stretches you can do to maintain or improve flexibility:

Static Stretching

One of the most common types of stretching is static stretching, in which you move to a joint's end range of motion and then hold that position for 15, 30, 60 seconds, or longer, Walrod explains.

For example, to stretch your hamstrings, you can touch your toes, either while standing or seated on the floor with your legs outstretched. To stretch your chest muscles, you can hold both sides of a doorframe and then step forward. To stretch your glutes, you can hug your knee into your chest.

In general, static stretching has been shown to increase hamstring flexibility in young healthy adults.^[2]

But it's important to note that static stretching is not recommended before exercise (when muscles aren't warmed up). Consistent research shows that, as a general rule, people should not perform static stretches, especially when held for periods longer than 60 seconds, before their workouts, Walrod says.^[3] Static stretches can actually make the muscles too flexible without allowing them to properly stabilize your body's joints, he explains.

What's more, when static stretches — held longer than 60 seconds — are done before exercise, the warmup has been found to decrease strength and performance, according to research published in 2019. [4]

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Dynamic Stretching

Dynamic stretches are exercises that gently move joints through their full range of motion, increasing blood flow to the body's muscles and connective tissues. For this reason, they are ideal to perform before workouts.^[5] Research published in 2018 suggested that dynamic stretching before a workout can improve performance when it comes to force, power, sprinting, and jumping.^[6]

Examples include leg swings, walking lunges, hip circles, and arm circles.

Myofascial Release ('Foam Rolling')

Myofascial release (such as foam rolling or massage) involves applying pressure to the muscles' connective tissues to help them relax, Walrod says.

To improve flexibility, foam rolling may be most beneficial when performed immediately prior to dynamic stretching.

For example, in one study published in 2015, when athletes foam rolled, their flexibility didn't increase. But when they foam rolled and then performed static stretches, their flexibility improved significantly more than it did through static stretching alone. Other research, including a study published in 2015, shows that foam rolling after a workout can help reduce muscle soreness later, as well as speed up muscle recovery. It's worth noting that both of these examples are small studies.

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More Types of Stretching

There are plenty of other ways to stretch your muscles, either on your own or with a partner.

Ballistic Stretching Defined as performing a static stretch and then "bouncing" at the end range of motion, ballistic stretches can improve flexibility, but are not recommended because of their risk of injury.^[10]

Active Isolated Stretching (AIS) Active isolated stretches are held for two seconds. Research published in 2015 shows AIS effectively increase range of motion.^[11]

Proprioceptive Neuromuscular Facilitation (PNF) PNF is a form of stretching that targets the muscle's neurologic system, according to Walrod. Multiple forms exist, but all involve a partner applying force and then the exerciser working either the stretched muscle or its opposing muscle.

And remember, when it comes to stretching and flexibility, repetition reigns, Walrod says. "Like everything else, flexibility training requires a constant commitment."

How Strength Training Improves Flexibility

Another way to improve overall muscle function and mobility is strength training (which itself is a component of exercise you should already be doing twice per week).^[1]

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focus on the lengthening of the muscle) was able to improve flexibility in various muscle groups in the lower limbs.^[13]

With eccentric exercises, as you lower into a squat or raise the lat pull-down bar to start, your muscles are lengthening, or acting eccentrically. By slowing down this eccentric phase of the exercise, you stretch the muscle while improving its strength and ability to function as it lengthens, Walrod says.

To make sure your strength-training exercises improve, rather than limit, your mobility, it's important to perform each exercise through a full range of motion, he adds. For example, in a pushup, be sure to actually lower your body as far toward the floor as you can (rather than cutting the exercise short).

Inflexibility and Hyperflexibility: When You Bend the Wrong Way

Stretching and strengthening on your own are great ways to become more flexible, but if a lack of flexibility is impairing your workouts or everyday activities, and traditional stretching isn't helping, it's important to receive an evaluation from a qualified and certified personal trainer, physical therapist, or sports medicine physician to understand what's truly going on, Walrod says.

Other issues besides inflexibility can cause problems with mobility. Arthritis, injuries, and muscle imbalances and weakness can all limit range of motion. And the answer isn't always to just stretch more, Walrod says.

For example, tight hamstrings are often due to weak core muscles that are unable to properly stabilize the pelvis, he says. This can result in the front of the pelvis



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A personal trainer, physical therapist, or sports medicine physician can all help you determine the cause of inflexibility and find the best solution for you.

"Hyperflexibility can lead to issues, as well," Walrod says. Hypermobile joints, or joints that move past what's considered a healthy range of motion, is more common in children than adults and can occur because of loose or weak connective tissues. When ligaments (tissues that connect bones to one another) become loose, joints can become hypermobile joints. Hypermobility can lead to dislocated joints, sprains, and strains, as well as arthritis.

RELATED: How to Stretch When You're in Pain

The takeaway is that mobility and total-body function depend on an intricate interplay of factors. Flexibility is one of them, and it is a vital part of any well-rounded exercise routine.

With additional reporting by Nicol Natale and Jessica Migala.

Common Questions & Answers

Why is flexibility important?

Flexibility, the amount of stretch a muscle allows, is important because it lets our muscles move through their full range of motion. It helps prevent strain or stress on other parts of the body and allows us to perform everyday tasks and exercises

safely.





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What can cause problems with mobility besides inflexibility?



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Nicole A. Solomos, DO

Medical Reviewer

Nicole A. Solomos, DO, is a physician specializing in sports medicine and lifestyle medicine. She is also a certified life coach and a health and well-...

See full bio

K. Aleisha Fetters

Author

K. Aleisha Fetters is a Chicago-based fitness writer and certified strength and conditioning specialist who empowers others to reach their goals...

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