

## **The Basics of Stretching: What? Why? For Who? When?**

### **What does stretching do**

Stretching increases the length of a muscle when you hold a stretched pose. Stretching regularly over the long term increases the length of a muscle even when it's not stretched (resting length). Greater the resting length of a muscle, the more it can move across its intended range of motion.

The amount of increase in resting length can vary greatly. For lower body stretches it is recommended that you hold each stretch for a minimum of 50-60 secs, for upper body stretches it's around 40-50 secs. Any duration above that is fine. The minimum number is the amount of time it takes for your body to loosen up and allow the muscle to relax into that stretch.

In addition to the change in muscle length, the process of stretching also increases blood flow to the stretched muscles. This is important as increased blood flow improves recovery and healing.

### **Why should you stretch?**

These two facts contribute to the following two reasons for why you should stretch.

- Reduced risk of injuries

- Short and tight muscles are at an increased risk of being strained or pulled when the body is subject to physical activity
- Reduced soreness and improved recovery post workout
  - The increased blood flow aids the process of healing which is crucial to getting stronger. Additionally, better recovery also means that you're in better shape for your next workout.
- Prevents muscles from becoming perennially short and tight
  - Sitting for long hours or holding any position for long hours, involves putting certain muscles in a shortened state (sitting makes your hip flexors short and tight). Over the long term, these muscles become short and tight even when not sitting. Stretching helps prevent this to a certain degree

## Should everyone stretch?

Stretching is useful for people who are inflexible. How do you know if you're tight and inflexible?

Simple test: Stand up and get your feet together, while keeping your knees straight, slowly bend over and gently see if you can touch the floor with your fingers, if you're unable to do so then stretching is good for you.

What if you can touch the floor, easily? Extremely flexible people are advised not to stretch even if it may provide relief. The reason behind this is because their muscles are not short and tight to begin with, they are long and lax.

## When should you stretch?

The answer to this question is complex as it can vary from person to person. Below are a few general recommendations

	Are you tight and inflexible?	Not tight and inflexible?	Have you been sitting a
Stretch before a workout	Yes	Optional	Yes (Hip flexors, calves chest)
Stretch after a workout	Yes	Yes	Optional
Extra stretches at other times during the day?	Optional	No	Yes (Hip flexors, calves chest)

*Note* : The type of stretching referred to in this article is static stretching (holding a stretched position for an extended period of time) not the other forms (dynamic, ballistic, etc).

*Author Note*: This article was written by Arun Pandiyan for The Quad.