Stretching to Improve Flexibility

About This Kit

Stretching exercises are an important part of a balanced fitness program. Stretching improves flexibility. Flexibility means being able to move a joint through its full range of motion. In this kit you will:

Step 1. Recognize the benefits of good flexibility
Step 2. Know the F.I.T. prescription for flexibility
Step 3. Learn to perform stretching exercises to improve flexibility
Step 1

Recognize the Benefits of Good Flexibility

Stretching or flexibility exercises are often the most neglected part of a balanced fitness program. Poor flexibility can be caused by bone and joint diseases, such as osteoarthritis. It can also be caused by tight muscles, ligaments, and tendons. Young people are naturally more flexible. As you age, you lose flexibility in your joints if you don’t perform stretches to stay limber.

You can improve your flexibility by performing stretching exercises on a regular basis. It is important to do stretches properly so you get the most benefit.

Having good flexibility probably helps prevent injuries by increasing your range of motion. There is also evidence that stretching improves your performance during exercise. It also has other benefits.

Check the ones that are important to you.

- Allows you to participate in recreational activities such as tennis, golf, fishing, softball
- Makes it easier to get in and out of a car or up and down from the floor
- Lets you reach to get an object above your head
- Makes it possible to brush or comb your hair
- Allows you to bend over to tie your shoes
- Lets you play active games with a child

What are your personal benefits for improving flexibility?

My Benefits for Flexibility

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Stretching can also be quite relaxing, mentally as well as physically. Stretches are often used as a stress management technique because you can do them any time and any place.

Which times and places might work best for you?

- In the morning before starting the day
- At work
- Before an aerobic or strength training workout to warm-up your muscles
- After sitting or standing for a long period of time
- Any time you feel stiff and tense

My Time and Place for Stretching Exercises
Step 2

Know the F.I.T. Prescription for Flexibility

Just as for aerobic exercise, there is a F.I.T. prescription for flexibility.

- **F - Frequency** – The American College of Sports Medicine recommends you do stretching exercises a minimum of two to three days a week. You can do stretches every day if you wish. It is safe to do stretching exercises before or after an exercise session. Many people enjoy stretching at the end of the session as part of the cool-down period. There is one stretching exercise – the calf stretch – that is beneficial to do before and after weight-bearing activities (such as walking, jogging, aerobic dance, tennis). It may help reduce your risk for Achilles tendon and calf injuries.

- **I - Intensity** – Stretch slowly and easily. Don’t bounce. Gently stretch to the point of tension. You should feel the stretch, but it shouldn’t hurt. Breathing correctly is important. Inhale before the stretch, breath normally while holding the position, and then exhale during the stretch.

- **T - Time** – Hold each stretch for a count of 10 to 30 seconds, then slowly release. Repeat each stretch four times. Be sure to stretch both the right and left sides of your body.
Step 3

Learn to Perform Stretching Exercises to Improve Flexibility

These exercises stretch some of the major muscle groups of the body. Follow the F.I.T. prescription when performing these stretches.

- Do four repetitions of each of these stretching exercises.
- Hold each stretch for 10 to 30 seconds with no bouncing.
- Stretch to the point of tension, not pain.
- *If you have arthritis or any muscle, tendon, ligament or joint problem, check with your mentor before doing any of these stretching exercises.*

Calf Stretch

Stand facing a wall, approximately three feet away. Place the palms of your hands on the wall at shoulder level. Keep your feet flat on the floor. Keep one foot in place and step forward with the other foot. Keep your back leg straight and gently bend the front knee forward toward the wall. Repeat with the opposite leg.

*Note:* If you walk, jog or do other weight-bearing exercises – such as aerobic dance or tennis – this stretch should be done *before as well as after* your aerobic exercise. It may help reduce your risk for Achilles tendon and calf injuries.
Arm, Shoulder, Back Stretch

Lift your right elbow toward the ceiling and place your right hand as far down your back between your shoulder blades as possible. Rest your chin on your chest. If possible, using your left hand, gently pull your right elbow to the left. You should feel the stretch on the back of the right arm and down the right side of the back. Hold for at least 10 seconds. Repeat with the left arm.

Inner Thigh Stretch

Sit on the floor. Place the soles of your feet together, grasp your ankles, and pull your heels in fairly close to you. Place your hands against the inside of your knees and gently press your knees down toward the floor. Hold for at least 10 seconds.
**Hamstring Stretch**

Lie flat on your back with your knees bent at a 90 degree angle and feet on the floor. Straighten your right knee pulling your straightened leg towards your face. Grasp the back of your right calf below your knee. Pull the right knee gently towards your face. Hold for at least 10 seconds. Repeat with the left leg.

![Hamstring Stretch Diagram](image)

**Lower Back and Gluteal Stretch**

Lie flat on your back with one leg straight out. Pull the other leg towards your abdomen and chest by grasping with both hands at the back of your thigh. Make sure to keep the outstretched leg flat on the floor while pulling the opposite thigh onto your abdomen and chest. Hold for at least ten seconds. Repeat with the other leg.

![Lower Back and Gluteal Stretch Diagram](image)
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Before Your Next Visit

In the time between your visits with your mentor, you should read and complete your educational kits. Use this sheet to record your work. Think of this as “homework.”

☐ List the benefits of good flexibility that are important to you.

My Benefits for Flexibility

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☐ List the best time and place for you to perform stretching exercises.

My Time and Place for Stretching Exercises

☐ Complete the statements in “Check Yourself” to be sure you understand the key concepts in this kit.

Check Yourself

1. Stretching exercises are an important part of a ___ ___ ___ ___ fitness program.
2. Flexibility means being able to move a joint through its full ___ ___ ___ ___ .
3. You can perform stretching exercises ___ ___ ___ ___ or after an exercise session.
4. Don’t ___ ___ ___ ___ when stretching.
5. Stretch to the point of tension, not ___ ___ ___ ___.
6. Hold each stretch for a count of ___ ___ ___ ___ seconds, then slowly release.
7. ___ ___ ___ ___ each stretch four times.
8. Be sure to ___ ___ ___ ___ both sides of your body.
9. Perform stretches on a minimum of ___ to ___ days each week.

Answers: 1) balanced; 2) range of motion; 3) before; 4) bounce; 5) pain; 6) 10, 30; 7) Repeat; 8) stretch; 9) 2, 3

Write questions for your mentor here.