



## **Stretch Your Life**

By John P, Mamana, M.D.

Executives who spend long days sitting, then evenings sleeping on lumpy hotel beds and not working out regularly suffer from stiff necks, sore muscles and headaches. Even with a regular fitness program, it isn't unusual to hear complaints of low back pain or pulled muscles. That's because the most underestimated component of a complete fitness program is generally ignored. Flexibility. Without a systematic range of flexibility motions, the entire fascial web will shrink and compress. This causes bones to pull close together which will compact joints and ultimately cause pain. Unfortunately, as we age, flexibility decreases as muscles become less elastic and tissues around the joints thicken. Working on strength and endurance is great – but not if you don't put your flexibility first.

When it comes to flexibility the saying "use it or lose it" is especially relevant. Consider that ten years of a sedentary lifestyle can cause you to lose ten percent of your flexibility. What's more concerning is that a lack of flexibility may lead to many other maladies – everything from stress to osteoarthritis to slow healing joint injuries. In fact, a lack of flexibility is now viewed as a major cause of general health problems and sports injuries. The National Center for Health Statistics reports that 14% of new patient visits to physician offices (approximately 13 million annually) are for complaints of low back pain.

There are several different types of stretches for optimum flexibility. The two most common are dynamic – which involves movement - and static. Dynamic stretching helps reduce muscle tightness and prepare for vigorous exercise or sports. Dynamic stretches are slow, smooth kinetic movements through a full range of motion that increase in intensity. For example, swinging your arms is a dynamic stretch. Static stretching is best following a workout and is not recommended before a sporting event as it may impair balance and reaction time. Two types of static stretches are active and passive. Static active is a stretching technique that uses the strength of the opposing muscle group to maintain an extended position using tension – such as lifting your leg. Passive static stretching allows you to maintain an extended position using only your body weight – such as interlocking your fingers behind your back and pulling your shoulder muscles together. With static stretching you should hold the stretch for 10-30 seconds for 1-2



stretches per muscle group. Whether dynamic or static, keep in mind some key rules. Don't bounce as you stretch because it can cause small tears in the muscle which leave scar tissue as the muscle heals, tightening the muscle even further. Don't stretch if it hurts, and breathe into your stretch to help elongate the muscle.

In addition to regular stretching, for optimum fitness, try adding a physical activity to your week that focuses on flexibility. Classes are readily available for yoga, Pilates, dance or martial arts.

If you are having trouble with your flexibility, see your doctor at Executive MD for a comprehensive screening and physical fitness program.

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