

Stretching and Your Health

Stretching is a vital ingredient to maintaining flexibility and elasticity of tissues in the body. In our everyday lives a few minutes of limbering and stretching can help to alleviate tight muscles from sport, sedentary or active work, and stress.

There are a huge range of stretches and ways to stretch. The following are some extremely effective methods for improving flexibility throughout the body.



Contract & Relax Stretching

Otherwise known as PNF stretching (Proprioceptive Neuromuscular Facilitation) this method is very effective for relaxing tight muscles and improving tone throughout the body. This style of stretching can be applied to any muscle groups that are stubbornly tight or difficult to relax with regular static stretching.

If you are interested in the technical lingo, the reason this type of stretching works is via a physiological response called Post-Isometric Relaxation (PIR). Contracting a muscle without shortening or lengthening it is called an Isometric contraction. Immediately after this contraction there is a relaxation response in the muscle.

There is another mechanism in the body known as Reciprocal Inhibition (RI). When you contract the muscle opposing the primary movement (the antagonist), the muscle you are aiming to stretch will relax i.e. If you're stretching the hamstring muscle group, try gently contracting the quadriceps (front of the thigh) to assist the release of the hamstrings.

There needs to be some caution applied when performing this style of stretching due to the risk of straining a muscle with overly strong contractions. Therefore here are the steps for performing a Contract & Relax Stretch:

Method One

1. Hold the regular stretch for approx 20-30secs to create an initial relaxation in the muscle.
2. Now gently contract (20-30% of your maximum strength) the muscle being stretched for 5-10secs while exhaling.
3. Once you have stopped the contraction in the muscle, increase the intensity of the stretch slightly (you should notice a significant increase in flexibility).
4. You can perform steps 1-3 in a continuous cycle 3-5 times.

Method Two

1. Hold the regular stretch for approx 20-30secs to create an initial relaxation in the muscle.
2. Now gently contract (20-30% of your maximum strength) the opposing muscle group (the antagonist) to the one being stretched for 5-10secs while exhaling.
3. Once you have stopped the contraction in the muscle, increase the intensity of the stretch slightly (you should notice a significant increase in flexibility).
4. You can perform steps 1-3 in a continuous cycle 3-5 times.

An Example:

Method One

Push the heel down contracting the hamstrings

OR

Method Two

Lightly contract the quadriceps by trying to straighten your knee.



Partner Stretching

Stretching with a friend or family member is great way of making stretching more enjoyable and getting some rapid improvements in flexibility. This process needs to be done carefully and with good communication between the pair to prevent muscle strains.

Spend some extra time listening to your partner's body and asking them if the intensity is too much or too little.

You can also apply the contract & relax method to allow the person stretching to relax the maximum number of muscles possible. Since your partner is helping you to get the stretch, concentrate on your breathing and relaxing the entire body.

If you have children, get them involved and have some fun – kids are naturally flexible and enjoy copying their adult role models 😊

Breathing & Stretching

The use of the breath is very important in the stretching process. The following steps will assist you getting the most from your stretches:

1. Start with a long and slow inhalation through the nose until the lungs are completely full of air,
2. Slowly release the breath through pursed lips, flattening the stomach muscles and move further into the stretch.
3. Relax into the stretch on the inhalation.
4. Increase the stretch on the exhalation.
5. Hold the stretch for approx 30-60secs.
6. Keep the breathing slow and regular to prevent hyperventilation.
7. Increase the intensity of the stretch in small increments.
8. Listen to your body and don't over do it! Stretching should be an enjoyable experience that is performed within your pain threshold ☺

I hope this Ki Health eNews helps you get more joy, good health and flexibility from your stretching routines. Remember to check out the [Stretch Gallery](#) for photos to remind you of forgotten stretches and learn some new ones. There will also be a Video Gallery added very soon to assist you develop and maintain a healthy and fit lifestyle, so stay tuned!

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