

# Stretching

## Who Should Stretch

Everyone can learn to stretch, regardless of age or flexibility. You do not need to be in top physical condition or have specific athletic skills. Whether you sit at a desk all day, dig ditches, do housework, stand at an assembly line, drive a truck, or exercise regularly, the same techniques of stretching apply. The methods are gentle and easy, conforming to individual differences in muscle tension and flexibility. So, if you are healthy, without any specific physical problems, you can learn how to stretch safely and enjoyably.

**Note:** *If you have had any recent physical problems or surgery, particularly of the joints and muscles, or if you have been inactive or sedentary for some time, please consult your physician before you start a stretching or exercise program.*

## When to Stretch

Stretching can be done any time you feel like it: at work, in a car, waiting for a bus, walking down the road, under a nice shady tree after a hike, or at the beach. Stretch before and after physical activity, but also stretch at various times of the day when you can. Here are some examples:

- In the morning before the start of the day.
- At work to release nervous tension.
- After sitting or standing for a long time.
- When you feel stiff.
- At odd times during the day, as for instance, when watching TV, listening to music, reading, or sitting and talking.

## Why Stretch

Stretching should be part of your daily life because it relaxes your mind and tunes up your body. You will find that regular stretching will do the following things:

- Reduce muscle tension and make the body feel more relaxed.
- Help coordination by allowing for freer and easier movement.
- Increase range of motion.
- Prevent injuries such as muscle strains. (A strong, pre-stretched muscle resists stress better than a strong, unstretched muscle.)
- Make strenuous activities like running, skiing, tennis, swimming, cycling easier because it prepares you for activity; it's a way of signaling the muscles that they are about to be used.
- Develop body awareness. As you stretch various parts of the body, you focus on them and get in touch with them. You get to know yourself.
- Help loosen the mind's control of the body so that the body moves for "it's own sake" rather for competition or ego.
- Promotes circulation.

- It feels good.

## **How to Stretch**

Stretching is easy to learn. However, there is a right way and a wrong way to stretch. The right way is a relaxed, sustained stretch with your attention focused on the muscles being stretched. The wrong way (unfortunately practiced by many people), is to bounce up and down, or to stretch to the point of pain: these methods can actually do more harm than good.

If you stretch correctly and regularly, you will find that every movement you make becomes easier. It will take time to loosen up tight muscles or muscle groups, but time is quickly forgotten when you start to feel good.

## **The Easy Stretch**

When you begin a stretch, spend 10-30 seconds in the *easy* stretch. No bouncing! Go to the point where you feel a *mild tension*, and relax as you hold the stretch. The feeling of tension should subside as you hold the position. If it does not, ease off slightly and find a degree of tension that is comfortable. The easy stretch reduces muscular tightness and readies the tissues for the developmental stretch.

## **The Developmental Stretch**

After the easy stretch, move slowly into the *developmental stretch*. Again, no bouncing. Move a fraction of an inch further until you again feel a mild tension and hold for 10-30 seconds. Be in control. Again, the tension should diminish; if not, ease off slightly. The developmental stretch fine-tunes the muscles and increases flexibility.

## **Breathing**

Your breathing should be slow, rhythmical and under control. If you are bending forward to do a stretch, exhale as you bend forward and then breathe slowly as you hold the stretch. Do not hold your breath while stretching. If a stretch position inhibits your natural breathing pattern, then you are obviously not relaxed. Just ease up on the stretch so you can breathe naturally.

## **Counting**

At first, silently count the seconds for each stretch; this will ensure that you hold the tension for a long enough time. After a while, you will be stretching by the way it feels, without the distraction of counting.

This is taken from the book *Stretching* by Bob Anderson.

Robert A. Anderson and Jean E. Anderson. *Stretching*. Bolinas (CA): Shelter Publications; 1945