New Rules of Stretching

Forget high-school-gym wisdom.

Use this myth-busting plan for breakthroughs in flexibility, performance, and injury prevention

By: Bill Hartman, P.T., C.S.C.S.

Unless you need to build our tolerance for boredom, most stretching is a waste of time. After all, when you review the research, it's clear that the most widely held principles of flexibility training simply don't work. Which is why few guys ever stick with it and even regular practitioners struggle to touch their toes. Worse, follow those age-old rules closely, and studies show that you'll actually be more likely to suffer a pulled muscle than if you hadn't stretched at all.

That's why it's time we rewrite the book on stretching and provide you with a flexibility plan that's not only effective, but also simple, fast, and painless. Your first order of business is to forget everything your high-school gym coach, workout partner, or yoga-loving girlfriend ever told you about stretching. Then memorize the new rules that follow. The benefit? You'll reduce your risk of injuries, improve your overall athleticism, and have an easier time tying your shoes.

Flexibility 101

Before we get to the rules, it's important to understand the basic -- but typically misunderstood -- science of stretching. First, a couple of definitions. There are two major types of stretching: static and dynamic.

You're probably more familiar with the former. For instance, a static stretch for your hamstrings is what you think it is -- a movement in which you lean forward until you feel a slight discomfort in the target muscle, then stretch the muscle by holding that position for a few seconds.

Although it's often prescribed as an injury-prevention measure, static stretching before a workout might be the worst of all strategies. Because it forces the target muscle to relax, it temporarily makes it weaker. As a

result, a strength imbalance can occur between opposing muscle groups. For example, stretching your hamstrings causes them to become significantly weaker than your quadriceps. And that may make you more susceptible to muscle strains, pulls, and tears in the short term.

Static stretching also reduces blood flow to your muscles and decreases the activity of your central nervous system -- meaning it inhibits your brain's ability to communicate with your muscles, which limits your capacity to generate force. The bottom line: Never perform static stretching before you work out or play sports.

Now, before you abandon static stretching for good, realize that it does have value. That's because improving your "passive" flexibility through static stretches is beneficial in the non-athletic endeavors of everyday life -- such as bending, kneeling, and squatting. All you have to know is the right stretch for the right time.

The Rules of Static Stretching

When: Any time of day, except before a workout

Why: To improve general flexibility

How: Apply these guidelines:

Stretch twice a day, every day. Any less frequently and you won't maintain your gains in flexibility -- which is why most flexibility plans don't work. Twice a day may seem like a lot, but each "session" will require as little as 4 minutes of your time. Also, there's no need to "warm" your muscles before stretching; that's a myth. So you can stretch at work, while you're watching TV, or while you're grilling burgers.

Keep in mind that duration matters. You can increase passive flexibility with a static stretch that's held for as little as 5 seconds, but you get optimal gains by holding it between 15 and 30 seconds, the point of diminishing returns.

Finally, do just one stretch for each tight muscle. Because most of the improvements in flexibility are made on the first stretch, repeating the same movement provides little benefit.