

# The Importance of Stretching and Flexibility

## 2019 FCE Leader Lesson

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### Introduction:

Why are stretching and remaining flexible so important? Maintaining flexibility through stretching throughout life can help you to remain active, live independently, and help to prevent falls and injuries.

### Objectives:

- Participants will gain knowledge on the importance of stretching and flexibility
- Participants will practice stretching exercises that help to maintain flexibility

### Materials Needed:

- Flexibility lesson
- Rubberband Hand Stretches handout
- Simple Stretching Exercises handout

### Lesson:

We develop habits for our bodies through the ways that we move and position ourselves. A lack of flexibility and poor posture may be the result of a medical condition, but may also be the result of a lack of stretching and poor body alignment. For instance, sitting at a desk job for years can contribute to tight hip flexors and back pain. Our muscles become tighter from either overuse or underuse and can actually shorten if not stretched properly. Our joints can also be affected as we age and become much stiffer and less flexible. This can make everyday tasks such as bending down to tie your shoes, zipping up a dress, buttoning a shirt, or opening a jar much more difficult than it has been in the past. The stiffness and tightness in our joints and muscles can also result in aches and pains.

Flexibility is the ability to move, bend, stretch and twist easily and to use the joints and muscles throughout their full range-of-motion. Even if you feel stiff now, there is evidence that stretching exercises can help to alleviate some of that discomfort and help to increase flexibility and strength.

Flexibility has numerous health benefits:

- Flexibility enhances the ability to perform daily tasks such as making the bed or putting on socks and shoes
- Flexibility improves performance in activities such as walking or tennis
- Flexibility helps to reduce the risk of falling by improving balance
- Flexibility helps to increase your range of motion and build strength
- Flexibility helps build and maintain healthy bones, muscles and joints
- Flexibility prevents muscle and joint soreness, stiffness, injuries to the lower back and other sprains and strains
- Flexibility helps to reduce pain in joints and muscles
- Flexibility is gained through stretching exercises

What can you do to fit stretching into your regular routine?

- Try a stretching exercise each day
- Start a stretching group with friends from your church, FCE Club, or people who live in your neighborhood

### **Important Safety Tips to Remember:**

- Talk to your physician before starting any new exercise routine.
- When performing flexibility exercises make sure they are done slowly and in a smooth manner. This allows your muscles to stretch and “let go.” When trying to stretch muscles that feel too tight avoid bobbing and pulling, this can actually confuse the muscles by sending out conflicting messages. This confusion can result in a lack of flexibility.
- When performing stretching exercises slowly move into the position. When you begin to feel tension hold the position for 10 to 30 seconds, then relax. Repeat the exercise several times.
- Listen to your body. If it hurts, STOP! Overextending inadequately prepared muscles can lead to injury and loss of flexibility. Stretching should feel good, if you experience pain when stretching this may indicate the stretch is being performed incorrectly.
- Make sure to include flexibility exercises as part of warm-up and cool-down sessions when exercising. Including these during a warm-up helps to reduce the risk of straining a stiff muscle, as well as increasing the flexibility of muscles and joints. Stretching as part of a cool-down session helps to reduce the risk of muscle cramps and dizziness.

## Exercises:

Don't forget about your hands and fingers! Oftentimes we may think about stretching our legs or back, but may neglect to stretch our hands. This can assist with pain from tasks such as typing on a keyboard and may help to relieve some stiffness and pain from arthritis. Rubber bands are a great tool to use to stretch these muscles and increase their flexibility. Try the hand and finger exercises in the *Rubberband Hand Exercises* handout.

Try to incorporate stretching into your life on a daily basis, at least three times per week, to help keep your muscles and joints flexible. Try some of the exercises from the *Simple Stretching Exercises* handout.

If you would like additional resources, please visit <https://go4life.nia.nih.gov/exercise-type/flexibility/>. There you will find numerous other examples of stretching exercises with detailed instructions, as well as workout videos and information about other types of physical activity.

## Sources:

*Flexibility-Walk Across Tennessee (2017)*. Retrieved from: [file:///C:/Users/Extension User/Documents/WAT Health Breaks- Flexibility.pdf](file:///C:/Users/Extension%20User/Documents/WAT%20Health%20Breaks-%20Flexibility.pdf).

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