

Don't Skip the Stretch

Has the winter weather got you climbing the walls? I have been known to climb a few walls in my time.

Power of the Plus

While I was attending Weigh to Wellness Week at Sandy Cove Ministries retreat center, I had my opportunity. With both excitement and a little fear, I took on the challenge of climbing the rock wall. I can tell you right now it is way harder than it looks! I started out pretty strong and made my way up about 15 feet, when I started to get really tired. I felt as though I had used every muscle group just to make the first 15 feet. I had about 20 more feet to go before the top. Pushing on, I came to a spot where I just could not find a handhold. Every hold I tried was just a little out of reach for me. I told the Lord, "If you had only made me just one inch taller, I could reach this next peg." No matter where I positioned myself, I could not get to the next handhold. Then I remembered something I had learned at a Body & Soul Fitness workshop—our muscles have this little thing called a "plus". The plus happens when you reach out your arm or leg, or whatever part, as far as you can and then when it's at the fullest extension from the joint or point of connection, you give it just a little more—that's the plus! One more time I reached up, but this time I gave it the plus and it happened! I was able to reach the next handhold, pull myself up and keep going! I experienced what I call the "power of the plus." We all have it in us. The power of the plus causes us to be victorious and to believe in and act on what God says is true about us.

In that moment I realized (again) the importance and power of stretching, both in our spiritual lives and in our physical lives. The Lord will often place us in situations in which he is stretching our ability to trust Him. When we turn to Him

we'll not only experience His presence, but we'll also find out that God is more than able to provide for us in any situation. The Apostle Paul felt God's stretching throughout his Christian life. In fact, you might even call Paul the flexible Apostle. Listen to how he describes in a letter he wrote to his friends in the city of Philippi his life and ability to trust God.

"...for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all things through him who gives me strength." Philippians 4:11-13

Paul flexed with whatever situation the Lord brought into his life. The Lord would stretch him and instead of depending on himself, he would turn to the only One who could carry the situation. With every new situation, his relationship with the Lord grew closer and he could do more, knowing the Lord would take care of him.

The same is true in our physical bodies as we stretch and take time to develop our flexibility. Stretching and flexibility training is often the most neglected part of fitness, yet it can have the biggest long term impact on your overall health and well-being.

To Stretch or Not To Stretch

When people are considering how to achieve their weight loss goals, stretching is not usually their first thought. Everyone thinks of cardio first. After all, cardio plays a big role in increasing our metabolism and burning calories. It's not unusual for women to work with great intensity during one of our workouts, only to leave quickly at the end without stretching because they simply don't have time. That's true especially for younger women whose muscles respond quickly.

But as we age, we begin to see the benefits of stretching, flexibility and relaxation training.

In your enthusiasm to start working out, you may be tempted to skip the stretch, thinking that stretching is a nice thing to do but really not necessary. However, stretching warms up your muscles, lengthens them, and gets them ready for action. You will run faster, throw better, jump higher, sit taller, and feel better with a good stretch.

Consider adding some of the benefits of stretching to your overall fitness plan:

Promotes and maintains range of motion in joints and improves posture. When the muscles in the lower back are tight, it's hard to even stand up straight. When a muscle is lengthened through stretching, it exerts a greater torque on a joint to help you excel while you exercise. You'll be amazed at how a couple of minutes of stretching your back will improve your overall workout (and prevent injury).

Offsets age-related stiffness. Let's face it! As we age, it becomes harder to move. I cannot sit in one position as I could when I was younger. After just 15 minutes of sitting at my computer my legs start to stiffen up. Some people are naturally more flexible, but as we age, we all lose some of our flexibility. Flexibility is primarily due to one's genetics, gender, age and level of physical activity. We may lose flexibility and range of motion in our joints as we age, but most loss is a result of inactivity rather than the aging process. The less active we are, the less flexible we are likely to be.

Enhance physical and mental relaxation. Stretching not only helps to release your muscle tension, but also gives you time to clear your mind as you enter back into your day. Relaxation is a state in which we experience a calm mind and a tension-free body. It is essential to our health and well-

being. Most of the time we are wound up so tight that we think tension is a normal state of existence. Intentional relaxation of the muscles gives us a sense of well-being. When we make a conscious effort to relax through techniques such as stretching accompanied by reflection, prayer and exercise, it helps the mind to become calm and the body to become loose in addition to lowering blood pressure, reducing arteriosclerosis (thickening of the arterial walls), slowing down brain cell deterioration and slowing age-related memory loss).

Stretch for success

Before stretching, take a few minutes to warm up in order to prevent injuries to your cold muscles. Begin with a simple, low-intensity warm-up, such as easy walking while swinging the arms in a wide circle. Spend at least 5 to 10 minutes warming up prior to stretching.

As with each part of your personal exercise program, we'll apply the F.I.T.T. formula to help you determine the best stretching routine.

- **Frequency** – Stretch every day. Because stretching does not take much time at all and does not exhaust the muscle group, stretching can be done every day. Stretch before and after each workout.
- **Intensity** – Gentle muscle stretching to the point of tension, never pain.
- **Time** – 10 to 15 minutes to stretch all major muscle groups; holding each stretch for each muscle 10 to 30 seconds. Start at the top of the body and working your way down to the feet.
- **Type** – General stretching routine that stretches all major muscle groups and connective tissue.

If you want to maximize your stretch and avoid painful injuries, follow these simple guidelines. When performing any stretch:

- Start each stretch slowly, exhaling as you gently stretch the muscle and inhale as you release the stretch.
- Try to hold each stretch for at least 10 to 30 seconds.

You will also want to avoid these common mistakes and misconceptions:

- Don't bounce a stretch. This is called ballistic stretch and can be effective for some elite athletes, but static stretching is much gentler on the muscle groups. Bouncing gives you a longer stretch, but can tear muscles. Statically holding a stretch is more effective and there is less risk of injury.
- Don't stretch a muscle that is not warmed up.
- Don't strain or push a muscle too far. If a stretch hurts, ease up.
- Don't hold your breath during the stretch.

Fitting stretching into a compressed schedule

Time constraints keep many people from stretching. Some complain they just don't have time to stretch; others hurry out of their fitness classes before the cool-down flexibility exercises are completed.

Ideally, taking a few minutes every day to stretch your major muscle groups will give you the most benefit. Even five minutes of stretching at the end of an exercise session is better than nothing at all. And all cardio respiratory exercise should be followed by at least a few minutes of stretching. If you work at a sedentary job, taking a five minute stretch break can help fight fatigue and muscle strain in the lower back, neck and chest. Sitting all day can also shorten the hamstring muscles on the back of the leg, so just the simple act of standing and bending at the waist can get the blood flowing back into the legs and calves.

Finding time to Stretch

- If you don't have time to sufficiently warm up before stretching, try doing a few stretches immediately after a shower or while soaking in a hot tub. The hot water elevates muscle temperature enough to make them more pliable and receptive to stretching.
- Try a few simple stretches before getting out of bed in the morning. Wake yourself up with a few full-body stretches by pointing the toes and reaching the arms above your head. This can clear your mind and help jump-start your morning.
- Take a stretching class. A flexibility class will help you to stick with a regular stretching program. Both Pilates and Martial Arts classes include flexibility exercises as part of the programming.

Even with the simplicity of stretching, we still have a tendency to want to skip the stretch; we think it's not important. But it is warming up your muscles, lengthening them, and getting them ready for action. Everything you do, you will do better if you incorporate flexibility and stretching exercises into your daily routine.

Stay loose this winter, even if you have to climb the walls!