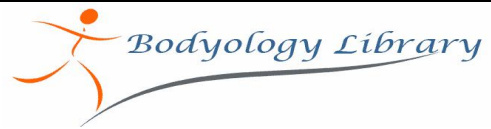


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The benefits of stretching

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In this newsletter I would like to concentrate on understanding what a stretch is, and how to better perform it so we can give better advice to our clients. In many ways the symbol of a healthy life today is a fit, slim, well-developed body, and at first it's difficult to see the importance of stretching. So, let's look at some aspects of stretching.

The stretch reflex

Muscles, because of their strong fibers, can lengthen fairly little over a long process of continuously stretching. Therefore, **relaxing the tension of the muscle** is the most important aspect of stretching rather. To relax the muscle's tension we have to convince the defense mechanism of the muscle to relax. This mechanism is called the stretch reflex.

The physiology of the stretch system starts with stretch receptors called muscle spindles. These are the nerve ending that weave around the muscle's cells. They monitor the amount and speed of the muscle stretch. The stretch receptor's (muscle spindles) goal is to prevent tears in the muscle that may arise due to overstretching them. Therefore, if we stretch too quickly or too much we will, actually, create the opposite result- by a reflex the same muscle that we want to stretch will contract as a protective mechanism.

Need some examples?

A good example of the stretch reflex is someone who is falling asleep while sitting. The person's head is falling forward quickly enough to be monitored by these receptors. They order the neck muscles to contract, as can be seen by the quick rise of the head.

The role of the stretch receptors may be compared to a barking watch dogs- just as they bark to warn an intruder, the stretch receptor will sound an alarm whenever they suspect an over stretch danger. When we stretch, we have to keep the stretch receptors 'numb', or asleep. **That is the reason why we should never bounce while stretching. Stretching should always be smooth and moderate.**

What are the benefits of stretching?

- **Better circulation:** The stretched tissue leaves more room for the blood vessels to expand and more blood can enter and exit the organs, supplying with oxygen and nutrition and removing waste products.
- **Helping the heart:** Some muscles (like the gastrocnemius) have veins passing through them. These muscles, by continuously contracting and stretching, pressing on veins and driving blood toward the heart.
- **Proper space for nerves:** Some nerves, like the sciatic nerve on the back of the thigh or the brachial plexus on the shoulder, pass through or near muscles. A contracted muscle around a nerve will create a mechanical pressure around it, or will constrict the blood supply to the nerve.
- **Flowing movement:** A well-stretched body uses less muscle power in order to perform movement. It has less resistance from other contracted muscles, leaving us with a feeling of ease and allowing us to have flowing movements in day-to-day tasks. We become less tired and age slower.
- **More air:** By stretching the rib cage area we may increase the amount of air our lungs can take.
- **Better well being:** By preventing diseases in general and keeping us in a state of well being.

You may choose any exercise or style of stretching.

I find that these important guidelines can help you enjoy stretching and prevent injuries:

- **Warm up:** A short warm up is necessary before stretching.
- **Rest before your start:** If feeling tired try to rest first by lying on the floor. Remember that a big part of stretching has to do with relaxing the muscle.
- **Slow motions** Move into the stretch slowly. Remember, you don't want to wake up the 'barking dogs', the stretch receptors.
- **Correct posture:** A very important issue in stretching is for each one of us to find the correct posture. A lotus sitting posture in yoga may look beautiful, but most of the people in our society aren't ready to perform it, and if trying hard you may injure yourself! We need to be realistic in choosing which stretches we can do. As a guideline, try to find stretching that use gravity to utilizes your body's weight to create a stretch. Try not to use other muscle's force to keep you in the stretch.

Next we approach the question of what to do while in the stretch?

This is, in my opinion, one of the most important subjects, and where most people have difficulties. The first problem is that we want to have good results, and we want them now! Therefore, we 'push' a little more and suffer a little more in order to have better results quicker. But it really doesn't work. By pushing we put the muscles under stress and pain, or in other words- we are waking up the 'barking dogs', and the next morning we wake up even more sore and with a little less hope of improvement. Stretching is a perfect example of the motto 'less is more'.

- **Explore:** Are you enjoying your stretch? Or is there any fear from the pain? A sharp pain, by awaking the stretch receptors, is disturbing the stretch, and shouldn't be part of it! Try to reach a state where you have only mild pain, pain that you can endure for a long time without being in an intense position.
Pain always contracts the body.
- **Look for places where you hold tension:** When we concentrate on a stretch in one area we tend to hold extra tension in another body part. Give special attention to the following areas: face, jaw, eyes, palms, foot, and the diaphragm-breathing muscles. Finding these places and consciously relaxing them is essential to improving our overall relaxation state.
- **Breathing:** Breathing should be slow, deep, and rhythmic. Explore the delicate difference between exhalation and inhalation. Notice how when you exhale and empty your lungs you can stretch a little more, and make this subtle motion the main guides to the stretch itself.
- **Imagination method:** You may use any imagination or visualization methods to create a stronger connection between body, mind, and spirit. This can especially help you heal an injured area, or concentrate on a specific problem.

Stretching is **not only** about improving the range of movements, but about improving the **quality of your movement**. So don't try to 'fight against' what you have today. Try to stretch moderately, concentrate on yourself, and you will be amazed by the different quality of movement you will find within.

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