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TIP: Stretching Guidelines

To increase the effectiveness and safety of stretching, we need to consider three factors:

1. When to stretch relative to exercise
2. How often to stretch
3. How long to hold each stretch

Factors 2 and 3 are fairly straightforward. The most effective way to improve our range of motion is to stretch five days per week. Each stretch should be held for one minute or two 30-second sets. Research has shown that stretching is effective only when done regularly throughout life. We should not stop stretching once we are pain-free or have reached a flexibility goal. Flexibility gains are not long term; they must be maintained.

The media has presented some recent research about factor 1 that has left a lot of trainers and exercisers wondering if stretching is necessary or even safe. Most of the stretching controversy is due to research indicating that static stretching prior to athletic performance could decrease both the strength and the velocity of movements.

The opinions of the experts are inconsistent and more research is needed. But, for now, the recommendation is to include static stretches in our fitness programs after activity.

To get the full benefit from a workout – whether it is cardio or strength training – we must finish with a final stretch. Even though the work is done, the final stretch has a direct effect on muscle soreness, strength, and growth.

After a workout, our muscles naturally contract. Stretching prevents them from tightening, and allows them to rebuild and grow stronger.

Stretching after exercise also relaxes our muscles, helps speed circulation to joints and tissues, and helps with the removal of waste products, thus reducing muscle soreness and stiffness.