

# Learn to love your S-t-r-e-t-c-h-i-n-g

By James Bone

## Feeling tight, stiff or just experiencing some general aches and pains? What makes this so and what can YOU do to make you feel better?

Your flexibility is determined by many things including:

- Your parents ie genes. This influences the shape of your joints, and the level of elasticity in your soft (connective) tissues
- Your movement and postural habits – the type of work you do, the sports you play, the exercise you do, and the way you hold yourself throughout your day, can all influence your muscle patterns and tightness.
- Your nervous system – if you tend to be more anxious or a worrier, your nervous system is more highly aroused, which places your muscles on guard, and so you may also tend to hold your muscles more tense.
- Your levels of Stress – chronic stress may lead to changes in your muscle, muscle tendon, and fascia, so that the soft tissue becomes thickened, hardened, more tender, and sometimes in some situations calcified.

This all contributes to making you stiffer.

- Past injuries and trauma – injury can be associated with adhesive scar tissue which can make your muscle and body stiffer to move.
- The way you think – we can form an internal image of ourselves, where we believe we can't move in certain ways, and this then becomes a limitation to our movement. The classic example is "I'm too old to do that"....

Stretching begins with a lengthening of the muscle fibres. When you hold a stretch briefly this mostly involves the lengthening of muscle fibres.

Surrounding each muscle fibre is connective tissue known as fascia. This fascia helps to keep muscles and fibres separate and aids movement. Once the muscle fibre is stretched, the connective tissue is then stretched. Sometimes the Fascia becomes stuck down, due to cross linking of collagen. As discussed above, this may be the result of scar tissue, injury, ageing, lack of lubrication or other damage. You need to stretch regularly and hold the stretch for a longer time to help release the fascia.

One of the greatest limitations to stretching is PAIN. Following the principles below can help reduce pain, but also doing some stretches dynamically first before holding the stretch can help, or the active stretch process can also help.

Stretching can also change your movement patterns, as it helps to enlarge your movement scope. However, real change comes through regular observation, and changing our movement patterns in our day to day lives.

Stretching aims to alter the state of your brain, muscles, nerves, blood vessels and connective tissue/fascia. To stretch in this way you need to give it time and awareness. If you simply stretch mindlessly after exercise or sport you will never experience the true value of stretching.

## There are many BENEFITS from stretching

- As an aid to Healing after injury – reduces scar tissue
- Reduces Tension and Stress – Research has shown that the process of stretching can help induce the relaxation response; further it has been shown that static stretching can lead to reduced muscle activation, and feelings of reduced tension.
- Decreases Pain & stiffness
- Improves your Posture
- Better Body awareness – you become more aware of unconscious tension, poor body posture and other problems

- Helps correct Muscle imbalances
- Complements strength training, work, sport
- Maintains or increases your Flexibility – as we get older our muscles and connective tissue tend to get tighter
- Improved Wellbeing – you feel better after you stretch

*“Emotional stress and negative thinking can lead to muscular tension, and the constant barrage of stress hormone may lead to zones in muscles of chronic rigidity – stretching & deep breathing can help break this pattern.”*

A Well performed stretch should leave you feeling a sense of inner peace and harmony

## **SAFE Stretching Principles**

*YOGA is the best way to stretch because it integrates all these principles.*

- **Give Awareness** – ATTEND to the muscle or area you are stretching - move SLOWLY into the stretch, allowing the muscle to RELAX. BY attending to the muscle and moving slowly you help to “turn off” the muscle stretch reflex, which would otherwise resist the stretch and put the muscle at risk of being injured.
- **Use your breath** – EXHALE and BREATHE slowly outward into the stretch – this will help the muscle relax and ease tension. Take slow gentle breaths, feel the stretch discomfort ease as you relax....
- **Cause no STRAIN or PAIN** – Avoid forcing the stretch and be KIND to yourself. Always move into a stretch by using your muscles to assist – don’t passively pull yourself into a stretch as this can cause injury. STOP or back off the stretch if you feel compression, nasty pain, numbness or pins or needles.
- **Cold structures injure more easily** – Warm Up before STRETCHING – do some movement first. Move slowly and dynamically in and out of the stretch 3 to 8 times first. This may also help reduce discomfort.
- **Only muscle and its connective tissue needs to be stretched** – Avoid stretching ligaments and joints.
- **Mobilize Joints not strain them** – PROTECT your JOINTS – don’t twist or strain your joints in awkward ways. AVOID joint compression – the feeling should be a neutral broad stretching feeling, not localized.
- **Integrate the whole** –
  - Draw your lower Abdomen in slightly, until you feel the belly firm, but not push out.
  - Lift your pelvic floor
  - Lift your lumbar spine upward from L5
  - Breathe fully and deeply

- **Hold the stretch according to what you feel** – Stay for 3 to 10 breaths or until the feeling of tension/pain lessens. As you feel the muscles soften, gently move further into the stretch. Repeat 1, 2 or even 3 times if you are stiff or tight. Doing a number of different stretches, which covers the same body area or muscles, may be a far more interesting and less boring way of achieving this.

- **Stretch Regularly** – Stretching by itself, doesn't last. If you don't continue you will tighten up again, unless you change other factors as well – calm mind, balanced movement habits, healthy lifestyle.

Areas of the body which may hold emotional tension or stress, or are used regularly due to sport, work or postural tasks may also benefit from frequent once-daily (or more) stretching, particularly the small muscles of the neck and shoulders blades.

However, if your goal is to increase flexibility, particularly of the large muscles, such as the hamstrings, quadriceps, hip flexors or lats dorsi, then a LONG STRONG SESSION ONCE or TWICE per week may be best. Some people may need more or less frequent stretching. If there is a problem with scar then daily stretches may be required.

- **Try Active Stretching** – to reduce discomfort. Muscle activation can lead to better release of your muscles. These actions help reset your brain for the movement.

- Gently work the muscles opposite to those you are stretching – for example – if doing the Western Stretch, to release the hamstrings, calf and back structures, you would gently activate the front leg muscles, thigh muscles, and abdominal muscles to draw you into the stretch.

- OR gently activate the muscle being stretched, then release into the stretch – In Western Stretch you can do this by gently extending the spine with the inhalation, and releasing with the exhalation.

- **Treat each stretching session as new** – Your muscle system is always changing – View each stretching session as unique; don't try to do what you did last time.

- **Observe yourself** – what thoughts, feelings and emotions arise – just let them go.....

*Mind is important in the process of Stretching – develop an attitude of ease and non urgency – taking time to feel what is happening in the body and mind. Touching your toes or whatever is not the goal; it is the release and mental state, which is important. It may help to close your eyes – to turn your attention inward. Acceptance is the key – accept where you are with your flexibility, don't try too hard, just relax into the stretch. You will find your progress will improve.*

- **Get Help** – Use aids to assist with the stretch. Use a belt, sit on a cushion or blanket to make it easier or more comfortable. If you are not sure how to stretch safely seek guidance you're your PHYSIOTHERAPIST or YOGA Teacher. A regular massage or Bowen Session may also help your stretching.

- **Time of day** – Usually you are stiffer in the morning when you are cooler, and more flexible in the afternoon. Why this is so is not known, but it may relate to body temperature, neurological factors or even the state of body fluid.

- **Keep Hydrated – get enough WATER**

Water and hydration is the other essential component to flexibility. Joints cartilage and body collagen, contain high levels of water. So make sure you drink enough water every day 6 to 8 glasses – according to the level of your fluid loss.

## **What to Expect after Stretching**

- Generally, you should feel more relaxed and have a sense of wellbeing after stretching.
- You may be sore for a day or so, after you start stretching or do a strong stretch, but this should ease quickly, and you should then feel more flexible.
- However, if you find that you become stiff after stretching, and are not improving, then you may be OVER stretching, and need to back off or stretch less frequently.
- Being overly flexible is not good for you – you may not have enough muscle strength to control your movement in every day tasks, work or sport, and this could lead to injury.