



Q: Dear Coach: I know that I am supposed to stretch with exercise, but I feel so inflexible and it hurts! What do you recommend? - Rocky and Rigid

A: Dear Rigid: Don't worry, you're not alone! For many adults we feel stiff, sore or awkward while performing stretches. Flexibility will vary for many reasons. Our internal structures may vary in terms of joint structure and resistance, limiting bony structures, chemical composition of the body, soft tissue elasticity, muscular balance, hydration, joint or soft tissue temperature, or the presence of an existing injury. Women tend to be more flexible than males, especially in the hips and pelvis, owing to their bone structure. Youth and adolescents are typically more flexible than adults. So before you even begin to stretch, you have to work within the limits of what you have and who you are!

External factors affect our flexibility, too. Warmer temperatures are best and the afternoon is usually easier to stretch than early morning. The type of stretch we perform will greatly affect our results - in terms of force and load applied.

I would recommend that you perform stretching after a warm-up or after your sport to have warmth in the body tissues and achieve good results. You can use rhythmic limbering, or active stretching, within pain-free ranges as a warm-up in sport. Pre-event stretches can enhance exercise performance particularly for sprints or short power bursts of activity, like high jumps. Endurance athletes are likely to do most of their static (held) stretches after their sporting event.

Choose stretches that are suitable to the sport you are performing. For example, if you are running, then you should stretch your quadriceps, hamstrings, calves, and gluteal muscles (all muscles of the legs). You may stretch your low back, too. This will help you achieve muscular balance and relieve your muscles.

Perform a method of stretching that is safe and relaxed. Work within a range of movement that is pain-free. If you push into the pain-zone, you may actually activate a protective "myotatic stretch response" that will shorten, not lengthen, the muscles. Think about relaxing while stretching, and keep a steady controlled breath. This will help release residual tension in a muscle rather than pull, manipulate, over-stretch, or tear the muscle! A good rule of thumb is to hold a comfortable position for 15 - 30 seconds.

Daily stretching with a regular routine will improve flexibility much more so than a short episode of awkward, painful or difficult stretches! Use props or pillows to assist your comfort - such as a belt to reach your toes while seated, or a pillow to prop your hips and support your pelvis, relieving low back tension.

The bottom line is this: Stretch within pain-free ranges suitable to your body, not anyone else's. Try to relax during the stretch, and hold a stretch without bouncing if you want to release muscular tension. Perform some warm up activity before deepening your stretches. Keep stretching daily and you will find the best results!

You may develop a customized program with the help of a qualified gym instructor, personal trainer, exercise physiologist or your physiotherapist. Attending yoga is a great mode of achieving flexibility in the body, developing patience with the practice, and reaping great benefits for the mind, also!

Good luck! We hope to find you soft and subtle soon!



Guest response - Sara Pazell, director of L'Amour Yoga Institute Pty Ltd, and fellow Paradise Training trainer with Coach Tim.