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LTE-To Stretch or Not to Stretch?

By Troy Jacobson



In the 'old days', a few toe touches and trunk twists were all that was needed as a stretching routine before starting a training session or race. Nowadays, athletes incorporate flexibility training into their programs, not only to reduce injury but also to improve overall performance. The question posed by many endurance athletes however is, "What stretching routine is the most effective and how much should I do in order to achieve results?" The answer is that one should incorporate a moderate stretching routine into their program - but not go overboard.

Coaches, researchers and athletes have discovered that a short routine (up to 3 minutes) of 'dynamic' stretches prior to a workout and 'static' stretches at the end of a workout are most effective. Let's briefly explore these two types of stretching methods and their respective benefits on your performance and for preventing injury.



Dynamic stretching can be defined as gentle movements of the legs, arms and torso that take you to the limits of your range of motion, simulating the exercise activity you'll be doing. They are often similar in nature to the training activity in which you are about to do (i.e. prior to doing a running workout, skipping is a good choice of dynamic stretching and prior to a swim workout, arm swings are a good choice) and performed at a low intensity. The idea is to warm the muscles and connective tissues with the dynamic movement and activate the nervous system at the same time, optimally preparing them for activity.

While dynamic stretching is done prior to an exercise or workout, static stretching is to be done at the end of your activity when the muscles are warm. It is recommended by the American College of Sports Medicine that static stretches be held for 10-30 seconds (to mild discomfort) with 3-4 repetitions per stretch. For triathletes, basic stretches that target the hamstring, quads and calf muscles are most effective.



Flexibility training is an important component of a triathlete's training program, but should not be over emphasized. A few minutes of dynamic stretches before and a few minutes of static stretching after your workouts can go a long way in making you a healthier and more effective athlete. Other supplemental flexibility training as found in athletic Yoga classes can also be beneficial for most age group triathletes.

However, as with many things in life, moderation is the key. Research has also



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shown that too much flexibility for endurance athletes, especially runners, can lead to joint instability (increasing injury risk factors) and may reduce force production and overall performance.



Strike a balance by incorporating a moderate stretching regimen into your program, including dynamic work, static work and other forms of stretching and you'll see the results on race day.

Coach Troy Jacobson, National Director of Endurance Sports Training for Life Time Fitness, is a former professional triathlete and a top multisport coach since the late 1980's.

