

The Truth About Flexibility

By Tony Bevilacqua, CPT.

Flexibility has been a controversial subject in the fitness industry lately, mostly due to the lack of scientific data to support its effectiveness with both injury prevention and improving range of motion. It has been for the most part mutually agreed upon among fitness professionals that almost any form of stretching will be effective at improving range of motion around a joint. However, there is still no mutually agreed upon opinion on stretching and injury prevention. If you go out and find 50 different studies showing a correlation between stretching and decreased risk of injury, then I can assure you that there are 50 studies showing just the opposite. So the jury is still out.

This article is not meant to debate the issue of flexibility and injury prevention, but instead to explore the ways to improve range of motion around a joint or joints. Flexibility limitations can certainly affect your ability to perform certain activities, but it has been blown out of proportion and has been almost presented as a chronic epidemic. So many people come to me and tell me that they are inflexible and when I ask them, "Where are you inflexible," they are usually quick to give me the common response of "hamstrings". I ask them why they feel they are tight in their hamstrings and often times I get a blank stare. I usually follow up by asking a question like "do you have any limitations when performing any of your daily activities?" Again, usually the response is a "no, not really". They respond with the "not really" because they are still hanging onto the thought that they ARE tight in the hamstrings. On the rare occasion they do come up with an answer that really has nothing to do with the flexibility of their hamstrings. It's almost like there has been a brainwashing of people when it comes to flexibility. It seems like everyone thinks they have tight hamstrings or whatever, but for most people they are still able to do all the activities they want to do without any real limitations.

Here is the breakthrough statement in this article. **MOST PEOPLE WHO FEEL THEY HAVE FLEXIBILITY PROBLEMS ARE REALLY SUFFERING FROM POOR CONDITIONING LEVELS OR IMPROPER CONDITIONING METHODS.** It's really that simple! There is not an inflexibility epidemic in the US, there is a lack of proper conditioning epidemic in the US. I can guarantee that 80-90% of all the little aches and pains and even chronic low back pain can be **REVERSED** with an improvement in conditioning levels. You see, people are always looking for the easiest way out, so when their back goes out and they go see a chiropractor or a physical therapist they are told they have a tight this or a tight that. They implement a stretching routine to improve range of motion in the joints, but never improve conditioning levels. Stretching is easy, exercise is not. For those that do try and improve their conditioning levels they often times do the wrong things because they don't know any better. So the problem keeps coming back and eventually all the muscles in the body become tighter to protect the joints from reinjury. If this process goes on long enough it is true that the body can tighten up like a drum. This is usually a cumulative thing and takes awhile.

There are multiple ways to stretch tight muscles, and I will briefly talk about one of the most commonly practiced flexibility strategies...static stretching. Static stretching is when you stretch a muscle or group of muscles and hold it for a period of time. This is by far the most common flexibility specific routine for people. The funny thing is that most people who have been doing this type of stretching have not gotten the results they were looking for in the beginning. What's even funnier is that they keep doing it expecting different results. Guess what? It's time to change your strategy. And this is where I come in. Static stretching leaves out one key component...movement. You can stretch the muscles around a joint or joints all day long but you are not teaching the muscles and joints to effectively utilize the new range of motion. Without actively utilizing the new range of motion the muscles will go right back to where they were originally. It's teaching muscles how to *use range of motion* that is the most important thing. And if you are using a conditioning program that takes joints through a full range of motion, you are actually strengthening, teaching, and improving flexibility of soft tissue all at the same time. Even if your range of motion is somewhat limited due to inflexibility, you can and will improve the flexibility along with functionality over time by practicing the exercise. By just stretching alone, you will never get the teaching and strengthening component of the muscle tissue surrounding the joint. And if you are moving joints repetitively for any period of time you are actually exercising. See how great that is. The whole point is...you can actually improve your flexibility, get stronger, get fitter and feel better just by utilizing a good exercise routine.

So what is a good exercise program? Well if you read my articles about cardiovascular exercise you remember me mentioning the five basic functions the musculoskeletal system should be able to perform. They are...

Locomotion

Level changes

Rotation

Pushing

Pulling

A lot of people think that running or biking or ellipticizing or stair stepping is a great way to workout, but in reality it only covers one area of musculoskeletal function...Locomotion. And if you have any inflexibility in your body, how much range of motion are you really taking your joints through? Not much really. The ankles probably get a good range of motion depending on the locomotion activity, but knees, hips, shoulder, neck, elbows, wrist don't get anywhere near full range of motion. So what happens when you go to pick something heavy up off of the floor that not only requires a greater range of motion, but also requires some strength through that range of motion? The answer is high risk of injury. Then for most, it's back to the beginning...static stretching while slowly ramping up their jogging, or biking, or whatever activity they were doing previously. Then the cycle continues and if injury occurs enough the muscles will get tighter and tighter to protect the joints. It is your body's way of preventing you from doing activities that have hurt you. Until these

motions have been relearned and range of motion has been improved and strengthened you will never get the results you may be looking for.

If your exercise program is sound and it addresses the 5 basic movements of the musculoskeletal system listed above you are on the right track. This is the key component to improved *usable* flexibility. If you want to add some static stretching into your routine; great! I actually utilize static stretching with most of my clients but it is not always for improving range of motion. Let me explain. If I have a client that has flexibility issues we will always begin with a warm-up of 5-10 minutes of exercise meant to improve blood flow to the tight muscles. This also increases the temperature of the muscles which makes them more pliable. After the warm-up we move right into static stretching of the tight muscles. This will improve the range of motion around whatever joint or joints we are stretching, but it is still not usable range of motion. When we finish with the static stretching it is off to go through our exercise program utilizing all of the movement patterns mentioned above. Because the exercises are being done through a full range of motion they are learning how to control their newfound range of motion from the static stretching. I have found that this works really well. For clients who do not have flexibility issues I usually save the static stretching for after our exercise routine. Even though they have no flexibility issues I will still do some light stretching at the end just because it feels good. It is relaxing and makes for a great cool down. It also gives me some time to talk to them about the workout. That is all.

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