

Warming Up and Stretching

By Ben Benjamin, PhD

True or False: Stretching is a good method of warming up before engaging in sports or other exercise activities.

Answer: False.

Stretching, although an important exercise activity, is actually the opposite of warming up.

The function of stretching, when performed regularly, is to elongate fibers. Warmup exercises create and distribute heat throughout the muscles, and is accomplished through performing very light strength-type exercises. They also slowly increase the depth of breathing, elevate the heart rate, and increase the volume of blood being pumped into the tissues. When a person is adequately warmed up, the likelihood of injury is greatly reduced - just as a sponge filled with water can be twisted with ease when wet, but cracks and tears when dry. Stretching is best performed after a warmup, or better still after an exercise activity. When stretching is done poorly, or in place of a warmup, various tendons and ligaments may stretch over time, becoming distended and weak. When tendons and ligaments become distended, these structures are more vulnerable to injury.

For instance, if the hamstring muscles are stretched when cold, pulling sensations are generally felt in the tendons at the attachments both at the knee and the ischial tuberosity. If stretching is performed instead of a warmup for many months or years, the hamstring tendons stretch and weaken, causing hamstring tendon injuries to occur at the base of the buttock, and also behind and at the sides of the knee.

Stretching is intended to provide maximum flexibility; warming up creates heat and prepares the body for more strenuous activities.

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