

Stretching

Here are the cold, hard facts on warming up, stretching, and cooling down.

The Basics of Warming Up

It's important to warm up your body before any physical activity. Warming up goes a long way toward preparing the body for exercising, both physically and mentally. It also helps prevent injuries.

The term "warm-up" describes many light-aerobic and cardiovascular activities, which are separate from stretching. (Stretching works best when performed after warming up.) When you warm up, you are literally warming up the temperature of both your body and your muscles.

Warming up also:

- increases your heart and respiratory rate
- boosts the amount of nutrients and oxygen delivered to your muscles
- prepares the body for a demanding workout
- makes it easier to burn calories
- extends your workout

Types of Warm-Ups

You can use many types of warm-up activities to prepare your body for intense physical exercise. Often a warm-up activity is simply the activity you are about to do but at a slower pace. For example, if you're about to go for a brisk run, warm up with a light jog, and if you're going to go for a swim, do a couple of slow freestyle warm-up laps.

Only after this light warm-up, which should last about 5–10 minutes, should you attempt to stretch.

Stretching

Stretching used to be considered the main activity before a workout. That has all changed now. Stretching is still a beneficial activity prior to working out, but only after you have sufficiently warmed up. The reason for this is that stretching cold muscles can directly contribute to pulled and torn muscles. It's also now known that stretching is important after a workout as well.

Stretching properly may reduce muscle injuries and provides these benefits:

- an increase in flexibility and joint range of motion
- correct exercise posture
- relaxed muscles
- better sports coordination

Stretching has to be done right to have benefits, though. Here are some tips on stretching properly:

Stop if it hurts. Stretching should never hurt. If you have reached a point in your stretch where it hurts, relax to where it feels comfortable and hold the stretch.

Maintain each stretch for 10–30 seconds. Holding a stretch for any less won't sufficiently lengthen the muscle. Stretch the muscles gradually and don't force it. Avoid bobbing. Bobbing or bouncing while stretching may damage the muscle you are stretching. This damage may even cause scar tissue to form. Scar tissue tightens muscles and can get in the way of flexibility.

Remember to breathe. Breathing is a necessary part of any workout, including stretching.

Practice equality. Even if you are a righty, it doesn't mean that you should neglect the left side of your body. Make sure you stretch both sides equally, so all of your muscles are evenly ready for action.

If you play a sport, you should do warm-ups that go with that sport. The same is true for stretching. These types of stretches are known as sports-specific stretches, and they focus on the muscles that are used for your particular sport. For instance, if you play baseball you might focus on your shoulder for throwing or your forearm for batting.

Cooling Down After Your Workout

The most efficient way of slowing down a car or bike isn't by riding straight into a brick wall. The same way you have to gradually slow down either your bike or your car, you need to slow down your body after a workout or exercise: 5–10 minutes of slowed-down, easy activities will go a long way in helping your body recover from a workout.

Your cool-down routine can vary from workout to workout. It should include light aerobic activity and stretching. If you're running at a quick pace, you can slow down to a steady walk to cool down. Cooling down and stretching at the end of a workout help to:

- slow your heart rate to a normal speed
- return your breathing to its regular pace
- avoid stiffness and soreness of the muscles
- reduce any risk of dizziness and light-headedness
- relax the muscles

Whether you are new to working out or have been playing a sport your entire life, adding a good before-and-after routine to your workout will give you the best chance of avoiding injuries and may even help improve your performance.