

Reap the Benefits of Stretching Without Causing Harm

Stretching is generally good for arthritis and can improve flexibility and mobility, but not for every condition and not for every person.

When you have arthritis, improving—or at least maintaining—range of motion may be the most important thing you can do to perform the normal functions of daily living.

“A big issue with older adults is thoracic kyphosis, or abnormal curvature of the back,” says Jeffrey Ciolek, PT, ATC, a physical therapist at Cleveland Clinic. “Some people lose mobility of the upper trunk, causing the upper back to become rounded. Hip joints also lose mobility, and that can influence the way a person walks.”

Stretching can prevent joint stiffness and help you stay mobile, but it has its limitations. Stretching does little to improve aerobic fitness or to increase strength. Overstretching or stretching incorrectly may complicate an existing problem, such as arthritis, and it may cause an injury. “We’ve had some success in getting people to exercise,” says Ciolek, “but we need to spend more time teaching patients *how* to exercise.”

Below are examples of situations in which stretching may be unsafe. Talk to your doctor or physical therapist if you have any questions or concerns.

Stretching Rules

When your doctor has given approval for you to stretch, and when your physical therapist has taught you how to perform stretching exercises cor-

rectly, follow these guidelines:

- **Warm up before you stretch.** Walk, cycle, or do light calisthenics. When you elevate your body temperature by increasing your heart rate, you’re ready to stretch.

- **Use static stretches**—in which a muscle is stretched and held in place for several seconds—to prevent diminished flexibility. Static stretches are especially recommended after an activity, when the body is warmed up, which makes it easier to lengthen muscle tissue.

- **Don’t bounce or bob during static stretches.** Give your muscles time to adjust to each stretch. Hold static stretches for 15-30 seconds, or break the 30 seconds into three 10-second repetitions.

- **Use dynamic stretches**—going through a simulated version of the motion you will be doing—at a normal speed or at the speed that would be required of you to perform the activity, such as pushing, lifting, or reaching for an object. Don’t hold the stretch at the end of the movement, as you would in static stretches. The word “dynamic” implies movement, so continue to move throughout the stretch.

- **Stretch every day.** If that’s not possible, you can maintain your mobility by stretching three to five days a week. Complete two to three repetitions per stretch—one or two stretches




Side bends are a good static exercise. Bend slowly to one side, return to vertical, then bend to the other side. Hold each stretch for 30 seconds.

each for the lower body, the trunk, and the upper body.

- **Perform one series of stretches in the morning** and add other stretching sessions in the late afternoon.

- **Stretch to a point of resistance**, but not so far that it becomes painful. “No pain, no gain” is a myth. “On a scale of 0-10, a five (moderate-intensity stretch) is sufficient,” says Ciolek.

Posture, Function, Fitness

Arthritis and age restrict mobility; stretching can enhance it. “The goal of stretching is to improve your posture, mobility, and fitness. If you have arthritis, stretching should be part of an overall fitness program that also includes range-of-motion and strengthening exercises,” says Ciolek. 

CONDITION

- Unstable joint
- Recent surgery
- Recent sprain or strain
- Acute pain on movement
- Joint inflammation

WHY STRETCHING MAY BE UNSAFE

- Can cause additional damage to the joint surface.
- Excessive stress (caused by stretching) can disrupt the healing process.
- Muscles and surrounding tissues need time to heal.
- Your body may not be ready or you may be performing the stretch incorrectly.
- Overstretching may irritate the joint.