

Stretch Your Stress Away

By Eric D'Agati

Stress and Your Body

Stress. It is probably the most overused and least understood word in our vocabulary, especially when it applies to the human body. Stress, in and of itself, is neither good or bad, as it simply refers to an applied force, whether it be psychological, physical, or environmental. These stresses in any of these three forms will manifest itself in the human body, in either a positive(eustress) or negative way(distress). What happens then is what early 20th century researcher Hans Seyle refers to as GAS, or General Adaptation syndrome. This process is further explained by another acronym, SAID. SAID stands for Specific Adaptation to Imposed Demand, which simply stated means that the body adapts with a specific type of fitness to any demands which may be regularly imposed on it.

So what does any of this have to do with stretching??? Thanks to the modernization of our present day society, we spend much of our time seated in chairs, moving through only limited ranges of motion. This then leads to shortening and hyperactivity of chronically overused tissues in our joint structures. Overtime, common postural imbalances will develop that will manifest outwardly as back and neck pain, headaches, lack of energy, and an overall undesirable appearance.

How Much Should You Stretch?

How much time that an individual should spend stretching is dependent upon many variables, such as their posture, demands of their sport or activity, and their genetic flexibility factor, measured by what is called the Relative Flexibility Index. This rating scale was created by Mariano Roccobado of University of Santiago, Chile. It is based on an individual's ability to perform nine different joint movements, scoring one point for each one successfully completed:

- 1 - Touch your right thumb to your right wrist
- 2 - Touch your left thumb to your left wrist
- 3 - Bend back your pinky to 90 degrees from the back of the hand - Right
- 4 - Bend back your pinky to 90 degrees from the back of the hand - Left
- 5 - Hyperextend your right elbow more than 10 degrees
- 6 - Hyperextend your left elbow more than 10 degrees
- 7 - Hyperextend your left knee more than 10 degrees
- 8 - Hyperextend your right elbow more than 10 degrees
- 9 - Touch your palms to the floor with your knees locked

If you score lower on the scale (less than 3), you have a higher risk for muscle injury and need to stretch often to maintain elasticity. If your score is higher than 5, you have a propensity for hyper-mobile joint movement and should be very cautious not to overstretch.

Stretching Guidelines

- ↪ Never allow for pain! If there is ever more than slight discomfort when you enter any stretch, pull back and try less aggressively. If the pain persists, avoid the stretch altogether. Trying to stretch through the pain will only cause the muscle to react by getting tighter, not more relaxed.
- ↪ Stretching is a resetting process by the nervous system to restore normal ranges of elasticity in a joint, muscle, tendon, etc. In most cases, the goal is to bring about a relaxation of shortened, hypertonic/overstressed tissues. This goal cannot be optimally realized if the conditions are not conducive to relaxation. Practice long, deep, diaphragmatic breaths, releasing air upon furthering a stretch, and always concentrating on the task at hand. Naturopathic physicians will teach patients to take twice the time to exhale as you do to inhale for a “healing” breath.
- ↪ Flexibility is much more often underdone than overdone. Try to incorporate some modification of your stretching routine in as many days in the week possible, especially on workout days.
- ↪ Hold each stretch for a minimum of 15-30 seconds each, and even more if needed. If the target area is not relaxing after beyond that point, move on to the next movement. Do not bounce or “hurry” a stretch.
- ↪ The primary goal should be for symmetry and balance from left to right, front to back, and side to side. Only after this has been accomplished should a greater range of motion be the goal. For example if you can lift your left leg straight off the ground 60 degrees, yet your right can only go 40 degrees, emphasize stretching the right leg until the range of motion between the two is comparable. Then you can spend equal time stretching both legs to try and achieve optimal range of motion.
- ↪ The type of stretching you incorporate should be considerate of the situation. Pre-workout, mid-workout, post-workout, and corrective stretching each is done with a specific goal in mind. Stretching just for the sake of stretching can sometimes be counterproductive.

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