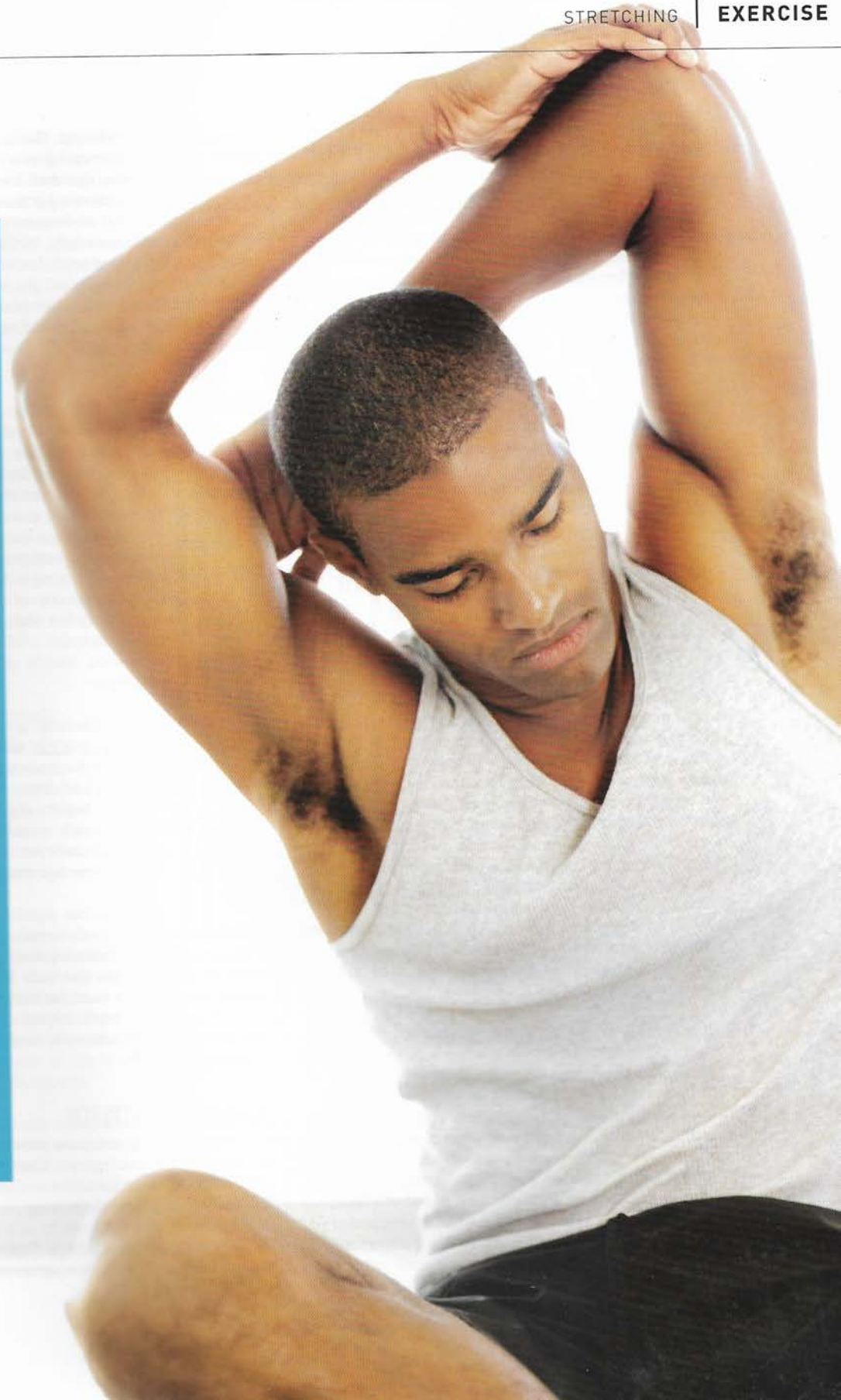


HOW ARE YOU STRETCHING?

TO SOME PEOPLE, STRETCHING IS LIKE WASHING YOUR CAR: YOU KNOW YOU SHOULD DO IT, AND YOU DO IT OFTEN ENOUGH (THE OUTSIDE, AT THE VERY LEAST), BUT IN REALITY, PART OF THE REASON YOU'RE DOING IT IS JUST TO KEEP UP APPEARANCES. WE ALL KNOW THAT WE SHOULD STRETCH, BUT HOW MANY OF US REALLY KNOW AND UNDERSTAND HOW, WHEN AND WHY TO STRETCH? IS IT POSSIBLE THAT WE COULD BE STRETCHING "WRONGLY"? Where physical fitness is concerned, stretching generally refers to the lengthening of the muscle fibres. It is an effective way to develop flexible muscles and tendons, and helps to condition the body for any form of exercise or training.

WRITTEN BY ROBERT C. TAYLOR, ISSA CERTIFIED PERSONAL TRAINER

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IN MY LINE OF WORK

as a certified personal trainer, I have observed that there seems to be a specific “stretching culture” in and around the Caribbean.

“Before you do legs today, warm up on the elliptical for 10 minutes. Then do a quadricep stretch and a hamstring stretch, making sure you hold each stretch for 20 - 30 seconds.”

Sound familiar? Warming up on an elliptical should be sufficient prior to beginning your leg workout. This is considered a dynamic stretch and is believed to be more efficient and safer than a static stretch (where you hold the stretch of a particular muscle group).

The more confident the instructor sounds, the less we question it.

It is no secret that the fitness industry in the Caribbean is less developed than in the US or the UK. Despite the recent trend over the past two decades that has seen local and regional fitness enthusiasts seeking to become more certified and edified on par with the international level, the fact remains the same: the industry simply doesn't pay well enough. It is not seen as a viable long-term career option for many instructors, and with that in mind, it is unlikely that they will put the time and effort into doing the proper research before disseminating it to the unknowing, trusting masses.

Apart from lacking proper instruction, another challenge to stretching “correctly” is that it is the part of the workout that we hardly ever question. It is deemed to be the smallest obstacle in the entire exercise routine – something separate and apart from the workout itself, that is done if you remember it and if you have time.

If exercising were a trip to the gas station, you'd fill your tank...but would you check to make sure your tyres are fully inflated?

If, however, you do happen to notice someone putting air in their tyres, the thought might occur to you to do the same. This form of social comparison is often what happens in gyms when it comes to stretching: you see someone performing a specific stretch, and you decide to try it yourself because you think it may be beneficial to you – never mind that the person may be doing a sport-specific stretch, which may actually injure you if done incorrectly.

Some forms of stretching, like sport-specific stretches, should not be performed by everyone. What we fail to realise is that some stretches are done under certain circumstances to achieve a particular result. Stretching is so commonplace that we frequently do it halfway, haphazardly, or too enthusiastically. While we count every rep and set through gritted teeth, knowing precisely what the outcome of the exercise will be, we don't put as much thought into the stretching part of the routine. We stretch to “keep limber”, to “stay flexible”, to “relax” before calling it a day and going home.

WHY TO STRETCH

Though stretching can be harmful if applied incorrectly, it is widely agreed that stretching on the whole is beneficial to developing greater flexibility. Stretching can also assist in the development of motor skills, improve body positioning and strength for sports, and relieve aches and pains from stress or from being in a stagnant position for a long period of time. Stretching is therefore a very important component of general fitness and wellness as the body ages. Poor flexibility can directly affect cardiovascular endurance, muscle strength and muscular endurance.

While stretching is known to improve flexibility, it is not solely for this purpose. Stretching the muscles of the lower back, shoulders and chest will help to keep the back in better alignment and thereby improve one's overall posture. Also it is commonly believed that stretching helps reduce or manage stress.

Stretching can significantly aid in reducing work-related stress. Breathing in deep

through the nose and exhaling through the mouth as one elongates the body into a stretch. This relieves muscular tension and enhances muscular relaxation – which, in turn, offers a temporary psychological or mental release. By stretching, the body ‘reformats’ itself, which may enhance overall circulation.

WHO SHOULD STRETCH

Generally speaking, everyone should perform stretching as part of an exercise regimen. Careful attention should be paid, however, to the suitability and timing of that particular stretch for that specific person.

Though important to any form of general fitness, stretching has an even greater bearing on certain sport-specific

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activities. For instance, in the case of golf or baseball, a high level of joint and limb motion is necessary to be able to make a powerful full swing. Lack of flexibility in this specific joint can result in lower back injury.

Basketball, on the other hand, requires excellent physical resilience. In this type of game, players need to learn different skills, including passing, shooting and dunking. Good flexibility is absolutely crucial for their joints and muscles to be able to flex to their full capacity and provide a greater range of motion, thus preventing strain and other injuries.

Another pertinent example is gymnastics, which necessitates flexible muscles, joints and limbs in order for proper, efficient execution of the routine. Lack of knowledge about the proper types of stretching can result in poor performance, as well as serious and even fatal injury.

Conversely, certain sports may suffer from over-flexibility. For example, sprinting or running is already a specific type of dynamic stretch, and too much flexibility may weaken the muscles needed for this particular type of sport.

TYPES OF STRETCHES

STATIC vs. DYNAMIC Static stretching involves placing the body into a position whereby tension is enacted upon the muscle in question, such as holding the quadriceps or hamstrings. Dynamic stretching, on the other hand, refers to swinging the arm and/or legs in a controlled manner, such as walking or running.

PNF (Proprio-neuromuscular Facilitation)

stretches usually need to be assisted by someone else. The client will lie on a mat, with leg extended upward; the trainer will position his/her lower leg on the client's opposing lower leg, then push the client's leg in the direction of his chest, applying gradual resistance. This type of stretch quickens the response of the neuromuscular system by stimulating the proprioceptors.


Another type of stretch is fascial stretching, which relates to massaging the fascia tissue around the muscles, allowing for more muscle growth.

While each of these types of stretches can be beneficial, it is crucial to be aware of the situations under which each type should be applied, as stretching is not a 'one-size-fits-all' component of training.

CONCLUSION

Stretching is often misapplied to the detriment of one's health and wellbeing. Knowledge of accurate timing and the appropriate type of stretch to perform is essential to fostering a good, well-balanced workout.

While stretching does in fact increase flexibility exponentially, muscle that is weak in this stretched position can easily be injured during exercise or sport activity. For instance, weakening the quadriceps before squatting heavy weights can cause permanent damage to an athlete. Static stretching also lacks the capacity to immediately reduce tension in very tight muscles. The key to warm-up stretching is to make the muscles stronger in the stretched position, therefore aiding the workout rather than impeding it. Thus, dynamic stretching will be better if the intention is to train immediately after stretching.

Now that you have a greater understanding of the how, who, when and why of stretching, it is still wise to be wary. The stretching culture is easy to be assimilated into without being aware of it. Not every muscle-bound gym buff knows what is best for you – or even for himself, for that matter. It is up to you to do your own research, and if in doubt: consult a subject matter expert. Knowledge of stretching theory is essential to implementing any type of stretching into a workout so as to avoid injury. When it comes to stretching, ignorance can literally be fatal. 

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