Dear Alice,

In the past I have injured myself by over extending myself either when lifting weights, or playing sports. I feel this is due to not understanding how to stretch properly. Could you tell me the most effective ways to stretch before any physical activity?

Thanks!

All Torn Up

**Answer**

Don't get all strung out! Contrary to popular belief, inadequate stretching is not the cause of all injuries. However, sticking with a stretching routine over an extended period of time can lead to increased flexibility and range of motion. The correct type of stretching depends on what physical activity you are involved in, as well as how much weightlifting you do. Getting muscle-specific will help target the muscles and joints that you exercise most.

There are three main types of stretching techniques: static stretching (holding a stretch for an extended period of time), dynamic or ballistic stretching (moving your muscles towards their maximum range of motion in a bouncing manner), and proprioceptive neuromuscular facilitation (alternating passive stretching and isometric contractions). Static stretching is the most commonly used form of stretching, and the other two are generally done under the supervision of athletic trainers or physical therapists due to the risk of injury.

For those wishing to stretch _before_ exercise, it's best to stretch following a mild warm-up, such as aerobics, walking, light jogging, or any activity that slowly raises heart rate. A warm-up increases body temperature and warms the body's muscles and tendons, making them less likely to tear or pull easily. Stretching _after_ exercise relaxes muscles and may prevent tightness. While it is not proven that stretching before and after exercise reduces soreness, some people feel better after stretching. Some people like to stretch during their cool-down routine.
Remember, it's recommended that you match the type of stretching that you do with the muscles that you use during your exercise routine. Here are some general guidelines for healthy stretching:

- Stretch the muscle groups that you use most on your exercise routine.
- Apply at least four to five 60-second stretches to the targeted muscle groups, making sure you're stretching both sides of the body equally.
- Only stretch until you feel the stretch, not pain.

One thing to keep in mind is that studies are inconclusive as to whether or not stretching helps decrease sports injuries. In fact, research has identified other factors that could be more closely related to sports injuries. These include a history of chronic or recent injury, having a higher body mass index (BMI), and switching pre-participation stretching routines (that is, those who normally stretch before an activity suddenly stopping). Here are a few suggestions to help prevent sports injuries:

- Maintain strength in the muscles surrounding the joint.
- Cross train to mix up your workouts and to prevent repetitive motion injuries.
- Include a warm up in your routine, such as dribbling for soccer, skating for hockey, and a few laps for swimming.
- Never skip your warm-up or cool down.
- Don't drastically change your warm-up routine. Sudden changes to your warm-up can also increase your risk for injury.
- Use proper technique and form to minimize your risk of injury.
- Keep your cardiovascular health up - a stronger heart allows you to keep up your strength and avoid risky errors that could lead to injury.
- Use proper protective equipment, such as knee and shoulder pads.

All in all, there are many factors that go into injury prevention. Your coach, physical therapist, or health care provider may be able to give you a few pointers on keeping your body healthy during exercise.

Learning more about injury prevention is the ultimate home run. Batter up!

Alice!

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