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SPINE & SPORTS: Is stretching beneficial?


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We've all watched athletes stretch, and all of us have stretched in one way or another, either for sports, activities or for our general sense of wellbeing. Research on the benefits of stretching suggest that stretching may not enhance athletic performance nor treat various pain conditions. There are alternatives to stretching.

Several years ago, studies on hamstring strains revealed that when elite soccer players were divided into "stretch" and "no stretch" groups, there were more hamstring and lower extremity injuries reported in the "stretch" group. This raised the question about whether static stretching was useful for athletes. Subsequent studies revealed that massaging muscles while moving a limb worked better than stretching the limb, and that there was no benefit to stretching for sports or in the treatment of back pain. A recent study of the effects of upper body warm-up on performance and injury also revealed that there was no benefit to static stretching on power or performance, and possibly a limited benefit for improving upper body flexibility, but only with a stretch of less than 60 seconds.

Rather than stretching, consider "limbering." This involves active body movement with resistance, such as moving your limbs and torso while using weights, resistance bands or body weight against gravity. Some call this "dynamic stretching" or "dynamic limbering," and it is better than statically holding a stretch position, especially in preparation for sports. For addressing back pain, static stretching clearly doesn't work, and dynamic limbering along with core strength training is the best formula. Dynamic limbering with resistance, or going through an exercise movement into a full range while bearing weight or adding weight, is what occurs naturally with certain exercises. Examples include a dead lift which limbers the hamstrings, since the hamstrings under tension lengthen to lower and shorten to raise the torso during the exercise, a squat which dynamically limbers the buttock muscles, a chest fly with dumbbells to limber pectoral muscles, and rowing to limber the middle back muscles. Unlike stretching, dynamic limbering exercises prime the muscles for performance when used as a warm up.

Have you ever watched your cat or dog stretch? How long does it take them to do it? They take only a few seconds to reach out, arch their rumps up in the air, extend a leg and shake it all around. If you saw your dog bent over and holding its hamstring in a stretch you'd probably call the vet to rule out psychosis or the circus to bank on fame. All kidding aside, research suggests we might need to consider stretching like our pets, keeping it brief and shaking it out. Afterward, move on to weighted exercises with dynamic limbering and progress to heavier strength or power movements.

So the next time someone suggests more stretching to treat an ailment or improve performance, tell them that research suggests that the opposite may be true, and we would be better off to look to Fido or Kitty for advice on stretching.

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