

### Flexibility and Stretching

Flexibility is often thought of as being the preserve of athletes –gymnasts doing the splits often spring to mind, but flexibility is something that we should all try and maintain throughout life: everyone can learn to stretch, regardless of age or current ability.

With age, muscles tighten up due to changes in their structure, and the range of motion in joints can be restricted. This can hinder normal day to day activity, and start to change us from active to inactive individuals. A regular stretching programme can help lengthen the muscles, improve joint action, and restore activity patterns. Basic activities such as picking things up, bending and twisting, reaching or manipulating things become much more straightforward if the body hasn't got inbuilt restrictions !

There are a wide variety of other benefits to preserving your body's flexibility, for example

- It's easier to relax (both mind and body)
- You're less likely to injure yourself during activity
- Maintenance of body awareness
- Promotion of efficient circulation

The link below is for a website which gives a variety of stretching exercises which can be done by most people, and also specific exercises for office workers:

[http://exercise.about.com/od/flexibilityworkouts/Flexibility\\_Workouts.htm](http://exercise.about.com/od/flexibilityworkouts/Flexibility_Workouts.htm)

Flexibility is not general, but is specific to a particular joint or set of joints (for example your shoulder or spine). If you are flexible in one particular area or joint, it doesn't guarantee flexibility in another. With some appropriate training, it's possible to improve your own flexibility no matter what age you are – it's worth remembering though that the older you are, the longer it is likely to take... but once attained it's fairly easy to maintain.

Once you've identified a few exercises which might help, there are a few general guidelines which should be followed:

- Try to carry out the exercises at least 3 times each week
- Move slowly and smoothly, and you should never lunge or bounce
- Don't go beyond mild discomfort (certainly not as far as to create pain)
- Hold stretch for about 20 seconds
- Repeat 3-5 times

Any time is a good time !

Breathe normally, and remember to try and keep the body positioned as normally as possible (remember last month's article on posture)

If you're not sure how to progress in developing your own flexibility, your local gym or leisure centre has trained instructors who will be very happy to help and give guidance.

***Finally, and very importantly: if you haven't exercised for a while, or have any medical conditions which might cause problems, check with your Doctor to ensure it's safe to increase your activity levels. Remember, pain is a sign that something is wrong....***

***Alan Clinch***