The Wellness Express™

Jump on the train to good health

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The Health Benefits of Stretching

Presented by: Erin Mills Optimum Health

"Have you done your stretches?"

You probably hear this question all the time from your chiropractor. But why is stretching so important to your health? It all has to do with proper alignment in the musculoskeletal system.

The Musculoskeletal System

Your skeleton is a collection of over 200 bones that give your body its shape and structure. In between adjacent bones you have joints, or articulation, and holding the joints together, are ligaments. These are the main components of the system that gives your body support, protects your vital organs, and allows for the foundation around which movement occurs.

The skeletal system is a static structure on its own. However, when you add muscles you create a dynamic, functional musculoskeletal system capable of performing work, maintaining an upright posture, transporting your body from one place to another, and allowing for personal expression using language and gestures.

With few exceptions (like the movement of the eye or tongue), a muscle attaches to two separate bones. As it contracts and shortens, the muscle creates relative movement of these bones by bringing the two ends of the muscle closer together. The coordination of muscles turning off and on allow for the complete range of human performance. Examples include the powerful, explosive movements created by a sprinter's legs, or the delicate, intricate finger movements of a professional violinist. This coordination is facilitated by a constant loop of feedback messages among the muscles, the nerves and the brain.

The length and tension of a muscle determines its capacity for strength and movement. The variable length of a muscle defines the functional *range of motion* of the joint it crosses, and its capacity to create tension allows it to perform work for you. Although a certain degree of tension in a muscle is necessary, too much tension can create imbalance, functional restrictions and/or pain.

Exercise of the Week

Reverse Crunch with Exercise Ball

Difficulty: Easy to moderate

(Consult your chiropractor before starting this or any other exercise.)

Start: Lie on back with arms relaxed on abdomen. Position ball behind legs so it can be lifted off floor with hamstrings/adductors.

Exercise: Lift ball just off floor. Pull stomach inward while inhaling. As you exhale, bring knees up toward chest, trying to lift buttocks off floor. Pause at top, then slowly return to starting position.

Repeat 10-15 times.

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What is Wrong with a Little Tension?

Whether it is caused by stress, overuse, repetitive strain or acute trauma, abnormal muscle tightness is unhealthy for your body. It places an excessive amount of stress and strain on the joints involved, predisposing them to arthritis and early degeneration. In addition, many nerves and blood vessels pass directly through muscle. If the muscle is too tight, this can irritate the nerves or compress the blood vessels, causing numbness, tingling, pain or decreased circulation. Muscles around an imbalanced joint can lead to misalignment or subluxation – this can be very debilitating!

Do You Have a Muscle Tightness Problem?

Your chiropractor can determine whether you have a problem with muscle imbalance and tightness by first assessing the range of motion and sensitivity of the involved areas. Problems in muscles are usually quite obvious, as direct touching of the affected areas is usually uncomfortable for the patient.

Tight muscles located in your spine may contribute to vertebral subluxations. Misalignment of the vertebrae is particularly damaging, as this can cause irritation of the nerves exiting the spine. This can further disturb normal muscle function, leading to more symptoms. Thankfully, chiropractic adjustments are particularly effective at reducing nerve irritation caused by spinal joint dysfunction!

Can You Do Anything to Help Fix the Problem?

Once your alignment has been restored with chiropractic adjustments, you should do stretching – this helps maintain proper mobility, alignment and function. Although there are a number of stretching techniques that have developed over the years, there are two basic stretching protocols: dynamic and static.

Dynamic stretching involves movement to increase range of motion (like performing arm circles). Static stretching involves little or no movement while increasing your end-range (holding a stretch). Static stretching usually involves a more relaxed mindset and can be considered more effective for postural muscles. Dynamic stretching is more commonly used before strenuous exercise.

There are also stretching techniques such as PNF, whereby muscles are stretched immediately following a strong contraction - taking advantage of neuromuscular reflexes to achieve better results.

Regardless of which technique is used, the goal is always the same: warm up the muscles first with some gentle calisthenics, then bring the target muscle into an elongated position and encourage it to stay there. As the muscles are trained to stay in their lengthened position, less pressure is exerted on the joints, and a more natural, balanced state will be achieved in the musculoskeletal system.

Ask your chiropractor what stretching exercises would be best for you.

Quote to Inspire

"Discipline is the bridge between goals and accomplishment."

- Jim Rohn

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