

Principles Of Stretching

There are dozens of yoga positions that stretch different muscles in the body. Part of yoga stretching is learning these positions correctly so you stretch what you are supposed to stretch, and so you don't hurt yourself because of incorrect form. If you are a novice at yoga stretching, I recommend that you take a beginner yoga class.

People have many reasons for stretching: To become more flexible, to avoid injury, to relax, clear their mind and reduce the stress of normal living. I often wake up in the middle of the night and can't get back to sleep because my muscles are twitching and tense from having run a workout and having not stretched afterwards. Fifteen or twenty minutes of stretching gets rid of the discomfort I'm experiencing, my muscles relax and I can get back to sleep. That's why I often stretch in the middle of the night.

Being fit for life also means being able to use your body in its full range of motion. If you never put your body in its fullest range, it gets tight and you eventually become unable to do things that require an extended range of motion, like reaching for something high or bending over to pick something up off the ground. Most stretching positions simulate these full-range-of-motion positions.

Whenever you do yoga stretching it's important to work on correct form and posture. Don't be anxious to jump into a stretch. You may forget something and ruin it. Bending over to stretch your hamstring muscles on the back of your upper legs, for instance, seems like a simple stretch. But most people forget to lock their knees when doing it. Lock your knees first, and then bend over from your waist.

There are few activities more poorly understood than yoga stretching. Yoga begins with knowing how to focus inwardly, especially at the muscles being stretched. Every time you enter into a stretching position, realize that there is a "right" amount of effort that will achieve your purpose. Right effort is relaxed effort, not pressing, not forced, and certainly not strained. Right effort is just enough effort to feel the stretch, but not so much to cause pain or injury. Right effort enables you to stay in a position for several minutes without wanting to change positions. I've observed the yoga practitioners in Honolulu's Kapiolani Park remaining in a position for an hour. By their standard, several minutes isn't very long.

Paradoxically, too much effort makes stretching impossible. It causes your muscles to protect themselves from over-stretching by tightening up. If you are strong enough to overcome this natural "stretch reflex," you'll injure yourself with stretching. It's easy to injure yourself with yoga so listen carefully to what your body is telling you. Pay attention, for instance, to your sensations of comfort and discomfort. These sensations fall into a range: soothing, very comfortable, comfortable, tolerably uncomfortable, uncomfortable, very uncomfortable. The right range for stretching is comfortable. If you are uncomfortable, back off or you will hurt yourself.

You should be able to breathe naturally as you stretch. You wouldn't want to asphyxiate yourself because you were in so much discomfort you couldn't breathe naturally. Breathing is also important because stretching is a subtle movement that only comes with relaxed breathing. Remember, you can't be in pain and also breathe in a relaxed way. As the muscles being stretched relax, you'll feel a subtle lengthening of the area being stretched. It's a gentle popping movement, usually in the direction gravity is pulling.

It may take a minute or two before this happens, or it may not happen at all if you are applying too much effort. So be gentle on yourself and don't expect miracles over night.