

Stretching

Running relaxed is the secret to running faster. In order to improve your flexibility, you need to do some stretching

by: **Hal Higdon**

Flexibility is important to runners. Running relaxed is the secret to running faster. In order to improve (and maintain) your flexibility, you need to do some stretching.

When to Stretch

The best time to stretch is after your muscles have had a chance to warm up. That's why most track athletes jog a mile or two, then do some stretching before the hard part of their workouts. You can do the same. Here are the different times you might consider stretching:

BEFORE RUNNING: Your muscles will not be warm, so don't overstretch. Just before running, do one or two easy stretches just to signal to your body that you are ready to go. Don't stretch anywhere near your limit. You should not feel pain.

WHILE RUNNING: Run five or ten minutes, then stop to stretch. Your muscles will be warmer, thus stretching will be easier. You still don't want to stretch to the point where it is painful. Stretching should be gentle.

AFTER RUNNING: Finish each workout with some easy stretching. If you have access to a whirlpool, the warm water will make stretching even easier. Stretching at different times of the day is another option.

How to Stretch

There are dozens, even hundreds, of stretches that you can do to loosen your muscles. Entire books have been written on the subject. One of the best is *Stretching* by Bob Anderson. Go to any road race, and you'll see runners doing stretching exercises before running. Here are a few:

HANG TEN: Stand arms at your side. Keeping your legs straight, bend forward and reach for your toes. Hold and repeat. Don't feel that you need to touch your toes. Whether or not you can do so may depend as much on the length of your legs vs. your torso than your flexibility. This is a good stretch to loosen your torso and stretch your hamstrings.

WALL LEANER: Stand facing a wall, your feet a few feet away from the wall. With hands on the wall and keeping your heels on the ground, lean forward with your hips, stretching the calf muscles. You can vary this exercise by stretching first one leg, then the other, or by moving your hand positions from side to side.

HEEL HOLD: Stand sideways to the wall, one hand against it for support. Reach down with the other hand and grasp your ankle, pulling the heel of one leg up against your butt. This is a good stretch for the quadriceps.

BUTTERFLY: Sit on the floor with your back straight. Pull your legs together so the soles of your feet are touching. Your knees will be pointing to each side. Wrap your hands around your feet and press outward with your arms against the inside of your thighs, extending the stretch. This will stretch the muscles around the groin.

Whether or not stretching prevents injuries is difficult to prove. If you stretch too much, or too hard, you actually can increase your risk of injury. Various experts will tell you to hold each stretch 15 to 30 to 60 seconds and repeat a certain number of times. Don't spend so much time stretching that you never get out to run. A well-balanced workout routine, however, includes flexibility exercises. For certain injuries, stretching may speed recovery. Every runner should develop a regular stretching routine.