

Vic's Fit Tips

I was at a race last summer and saw one of the most common mistakes in running. There was a group of runners getting out of their car and immediately stretching. Sounds perfectly normal, right? Except that stretching cold muscles is an invitation to injury! When should you stretch? How long should you stretch? What muscles need the most attention?

I hope the group of runners I saw were able to complete their race, injury free. My goal is to help you remain injury free whether you are training for a marathon or taking the dog for a jog. Stretching is very important for keeping your muscles lengthened and stress-free. It isn't difficult to follow a regular routine of stretches to keep you feeling light and ready for anything. Here goes. First, I tell all my clients to stretch only after warming up with some light running. Never stretch until you are warmed up. Make that your first rule of stretching.

Try this, warm up with some slow jogging, or, if you are a beginning runner some brisk walking. You need to get your heart rate elevated slowly until your core temperature spreads to your extremities. This should take at least 12 minutes, but plan on up to 20 minutes if needed. Yikes! You say that's your whole workout? That could be true, in which case do your stretching at the end of your workout, not the beginning. Once your extremities feel warmed up you are ready to stretch. You can start with whichever muscles you feel most comfortable with, but be sure to include all the major running muscle groups. Most important, one group of muscles runners often neglect, are the hip flexors so be sure to include them in your routine. Of course you should stretch your hamstrings, quads, and calves and remember to include the upper body too. Hold each stretch for 20 seconds at least, any less and you are not getting the most benefit.

Always warm up before stretching because cold stretching causes micro-traumas to soft tissue. Stretch daily. Stretch all your muscle groups and hold each stretch for 20 – 30 seconds.

In our next article, we'll discuss proper stretching technique, how it should feel, and how to tell if you are doing it wrong.

Vic and James

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