

Vic's Fit Tips

Stretching is, I would say, vitally important to remaining injury free throughout your training. One of our good running friends was famous for having more injuries than anyone we knew. When I watched him stretch, I knew why! He was famous for holding a stretch for no longer than 5 seconds! That was if he bothered to do it at all. Let's examine the proper way to stretch, what it should feel like and how stretching will help you stay injury free.

Last time, we talked about the importance of stretching after a thorough warm up. So today, I'll assume you have finished your warm up and are ready to start stretching. It doesn't matter if this has become part of your cool down, for a shorter workout, or if you are preparing to run intervals or tempos. The important thing is that you have warmed up your body first. Cold stretching causes micro-traumas, which are big no-no's. When you warm up first, you avoid causing micro-tears in the connections between muscles and bone. These micro-tears are micro-traumas that heal with scar tissue. Many runners suffer needlessly from accumulated aches and pains. This may be caused by accumulated scar tissue from micro-traumas. Warm up first, and you will avoid this.

When we exercise, we work our muscles (obviously), but what is not obvious is that your muscles can only do two things: contract, and relax. That's it. Muscles contract, they don't push. A weightlifter's muscles cannot push the weights up, it isn't physically possible. Take a close look and you will see that the weightlifter is using muscles that pull (contract) to raise the weights. You can see this yourself as you rise from a squat. The contracting muscles, your quads, are doing all the work pulling you upright. When muscles contract, the muscle fibres are actually sliding past one another. Provided you have decent nutrition, the sliding part usually works fine, and is seldom a concern. However the parts that connect to bone attachments (tendons) are a concern and these are the most likely to tear or suffer damage. When you are warmed up your muscles are lengthened and will stretch more easily. Hold your stretch until you feel the muscle relax slightly, about 20 – 30 seconds by the clock, no cheating! This is the key. When you feel the muscle give a little, your stretch was successful.

There doesn't seem to be a lot of benefit to be gained from holding the stretch any longer, but you really aren't doing anything if you don't hold it long enough. Hold each stretch, for every muscle 20 – 30 seconds, until you feel the muscle give a little. Follow these tips and you will find your running more enjoyable, you will feel more relaxed, your times will improve and it will help you remain injury-free.

Vic and James

Vic Keller owns Vic Fitness Inc.

James Slade writes for On the Run in his spare time

