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A THREE-PART SERIES ON THE BENEFITS OF STRETCHING
TODAY: PROPER TECHNIQUE

Ease into stretching

Done daily, it will help you feel energized and loose

By Mary Beth Faller
THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Watch a cat stretch some time. It stretches long and lean. It radiates contentment and relaxation.

It's not in pain or driven or hurried.

Stretching should feel good. You should reward yourself with a languorous stretching session not only after your workouts, but also on non-workout days.

"We were built to move, but we sit in chairs and drive and keep ourselves in confined spaces," says Tricia Schafer, a personal trainer and certified flexibility specialist in Phoenix. "Our bodies are compressed."

Desk sitting, driving, flying and general inactivity can shorten the muscles and tighten the fascia, the thin layer of tissue that covers the muscles. This leads to inflexibility, which can lead to injuries and pain, especially in the lower back. Stretching increases flexibility, which is the range of motion around a joint. Flexibility also can decline with age.

David Reiter, 60, of Phoenix, stays

very active, running and hiking Piestewa Peak three times a week, despite major back surgery five years ago. But after struggling with aches and pains, he started training with Schafer.

"When you've done something all your life, you feel like you know everything," he says. "I wasn't sure it was going to help."

But after a few weeks, he noticed improvements in his calves and feet.

"As I continued, I noticed that I could go home and not have the pain I used to simply because I stretched my muscles," Reiter says.

"The beauty of flexibility training is that it teaches us to use what we've got most effectively," Schafer says. "It restores balance. Restoring flexibility can relax the body as a whole."

"You're training the body to respond to the trauma of everyday life, like reaching high for something."

Many people make mistakes when stretching, such as overdoing it or thinking it has to hurt to be effective.

"Sometimes you get, 'A-ha! I didn't know I had that muscle,'" Schafer says. "But there's a difference between 'a-ha!' and pain. You should not feel the stretch in terms of dis-

comfort. You should feel it in terms of, 'Oh, wow, I can walk faster.'"

There are two recommended kinds of stretching: static, in which stretches are held steady for a few seconds, and dynamic, which incorporates controlled movement to use all muscles from stretch to stretch. (There's also ballistic stretching, the jerky, bouncy type you learned in gym class that's not recommended for most people because it increases the risk of injury.)

"Holding stretches won't necessarily hurt you, but you don't get the full benefit of the time you spent stretching," says Schafer, who describes her method as somewhere between static and dynamic, with gentle movement. Reiter now stretches six days a week.

"I'm so tired after my workout or climb that sometimes the last thing I want to do is stretch. But I force myself because I know it helps," he says. "It helps in everyday life."

Details: Tricia Schafer's practice is Starting Now Fitness, (602) 469-6402 or www.startingnowfitness.com.

Reach the reporter at marybeth.faller@arizonarepublic.com or (602) 444-8167.

Proper stretching

Do

- Breathe.
- Relax and use gravity.
- Think about the entire body. Don't just isolate one part.
- Use constant, gentle movement by varying the angle of your joint (pointing outward to slowly pointing inward, for example).

Don't

- Bounce or force a stretch.
- Overstretch to the point where you feel tingling or pain. You should never be sore afterward.
- Stretch when cold. Stretch after your workout. If it's not a workout day, march in place for about five minutes, or until you start to break a sweat.
- Remain static for more than a few seconds. Use breathing to create gentle movement.
- Stretch without consulting a doctor if you have osteoporosis, arthritis, an injury or back or neck pain.



CHRISTINE KEITH/
THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Job Salinas Hernandez volunteers at a community garden.

HOW I DID IT

Motivation was his dedication to family

Name: Job Salinas Hernandez.

Age: 51.

Home: Phoenix.

Job: Electrician and plumber.

The issue: Salinas Hernandez suffered such severe and unrelenting headaches that he took 10 to 16 Advils daily for more than a year. "I swallowed them like M&Ms," he says. His family doctor was stumped, suspecting high blood pressure as the cause. Salinas Hernandez blamed sinus problems. Then on Dec. 16, 1999, the puzzle was solved: A previously undetected bulging vein burst and bled in his brain. The ruptured aneurysm left him in a coma for two days, blind, weak and unable to speak above a whisper. A Jehovah's Witness, he refused blood transfusions.

The motivation: "To survive something like an aneurysm and then be blind for the rest of my life — I just didn't accept that," he says. His autistic grandson, Tony, was extra motivation. "I knew my wife, Grace, needed me, but he needed me more. Nobody baby-sits him like I do." Because Salinas Hernandez believed God let him live so he could care for his family and community, he dedicated himself to recovery with the help of doctors and therapists at St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center/Barrow Neurological Institute and Banner Good Samaritan Medical Center, both in Phoenix.

The change: After starting therapy to help him adapt to living with blindness, Salinas Hernandez underwent surgery that restored his sight. Other therapy helped him regain muscle strength and some of the two years of memory erased by the aneurysm. And, during a phone call with an out-of-state daughter, his normal voice returned. "The doctors say I'm a walking miracle."

The gain: In addition to helping care for his grandson, Salinas Hernandez volunteers with Block Watch, a community garden and the Bone Builders fitness program at Marcos de Niza Senior Center in central Phoenix. He also serves as sergeant-at-arms for the community's tenant council, works with area youth and makes craft items to raise money for the center. "I'm better off now," he says. "I take care of my health. I walk a lot. I was always in a hurry before and worked all the time. Now I'm more calm with my wife and kids and don't blow up over little things."

Salinas Hernandez' tips: People should make good health and happiness their priorities, he says. "Don't take anything for granted. Don't think, 'I'll do this in 10 years.' You never know if you'll be around then."

— Connie Midey

INCORRECT

Hamstring, lower back
Here, the head is up and the neck is tight, not taking advantage of gravity to help with the stretch.

CORRECT

Hamstring, lower back
Use gravity to lean over, relaxing your head and neck.

Quadriceps
If you're not able to grab your foot and hold it behind you, try this gentle quad stretch. Lift your foot on an exercise ball.

Quadriceps
If you're hopping on one foot to grab your other foot so you can stretch your quad, you're not ready for this stretch, which can injure the knee and put the back at risk.

Hamstring
This makes the body unstable and can aggravate back pain.

Hamstring
Lie on the floor and lift your leg against the wall. The back is relaxed and butt is on the floor. Gently rotate your foot out and back, from the hip, to stretch all the muscles.

All-around
This is a relaxing stretch for the neck, back and abdomen. Tricia Schafer calls it the "snow angel." Lie on the ball on your back and gently roll while moving the arms as though you're making a snow angel.

Advanced glute
Lie on floor with foot flat on wall. Cross leg over and gently press crossed knee with hand.

More correct stretches

Check with your doctor before doing any stretches if you have osteoporosis, arthritis, an injury or back or neck pain. Make sure the exercise ball is on carpet or a sticky mat, not tile or wood.

Hip flexor

Press your hip bone into the ball, keeping your back straight and using the ball for support.



Outer leg

Lie on floor with leg against wall, hips lined up. From hip, gently move raised leg toward other leg, focusing on stretching the outer part of the leg.



Upper back

Kneel on floor, using ball as support. Place arm on ball in "karate chop" position. Roll forward and backward.



Glute

Sit in a chair, with back straight, and cross leg over knee, keeping knees at 90-degree angles. Gently press crossed knee down with hand. To make it more advanced, lean over your foot.



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