

Functional Flexibility Secrets

Overview

There are lots of different types of flexibility training ... for the purposes of this report, we're just going to focus on static and dynamic flexibility training . Static stretching - your traditional 'stretch-and-hold' type of activity - is best for increasing muscle length, 'ironing out' imbalances and restoring proper length-tension relationships. Dynamic stretching is for, among other things, building functional flexibility and preparing you for optimal performance.

We'll address static stretching first; static stretching is best done *post* workout (lots of recent research points to this) while dynamic stretching is best done as a warm-up. You'll want to refer to the Ultimate Fitness Resource Manual for details on exactly how to incorporate these stretches into your overall fitness routine.

Static Stretches

Hamstrings and Calves



For those of you who have done some yoga, this one is like the Downward Dog pose. Start in a Push-Up position and push your hips up towards the sky; you should feel like you have a drawstring pulling your hips up. Push the heels towards the ground. The back should be flat, not rounded. Look back at the legs. Feel the stretch in the back of the legs

Functional Flexibility Secrets

and in the lower leg as well.

Hip Flexors



The Hip Flexors are a chronically tight muscle group, especially for those of us who sit at a desk all day. In a kneeling position, push the hips forward by squeezing the glutes – pretend you are a coin between your cheeks! The harder you squeeze ‘em, the better the stretch. Arms are reaching towards the sky for an increased stretch.

Functional Flexibility Secrets

Piriformis



Start in the top of the Push-Up position; bring the right knee to the right wrist. The right foot should cross the left thigh. To increase the stretch, push the hips towards the ground and straighten the arms. This is a great one for unlocking tight hips. If your knees tend track outside your toes when you squat, this is a great stretch for you.

Chest/ Thoracic Spine



This stretch opens up the pecs, shoulders, and thoracic spine (middle of your back). Knees are on top of each other and pulled up towards the chest, and the arms are flat on

Functional Flexibility Secrets

the ground. Reach both shoulders towards the ground.

Lats



The Latissimus Dorsi is a muscle that runs all the way from the shoulder to the pelvis – it's like the 'bridge' from the upper body to the lower body. It's also probably tight on you if you're like 95% of other sedentary Americans. For this stretch, start in the all-fours position. Sit the hips back and sit on your feet. You can spread the knees apart for more of a stretch if you'd like. Reach out as far as you can with the hands.

Another great way to stretch out the lats is by simply hanging from a Pull-Up bar. This exercise decompresses the spine and stretches the entire upper body.

Now on to the dynamic flexibility component ...

Functional Flexibility Secrets

Dynamic Flexibility

Research has actually shown that static stretching before a workout can decrease performance. So what to do from now on to get yourself ready to work out? Dynamic stretching, movement prep – there are several names for dynamic flexibility. Here's a quick definition from www.cmcrossroads.com:

"Dynamic stretching involves moving parts of your body and gradually increasing reach, speed of movement, or both. Do not confuse dynamic stretching with ballistic stretching! Dynamic stretching consists of controlled leg and arm swings that take you (gently!) to the limits of your range of motion. Ballistic stretches involve trying to force a part of the body beyond its range of motion. In dynamic stretches, there are no bounces or "jerky" movements. An example of dynamic stretching would be slow, controlled leg swings, arm swings, or torso twists."

I like to define a dynamic warm-up as moving your body through a full, functional range of motion at speed. Specific dynamic stretches, like Hand Walks, could be included in this definition, in addition to things like low intensity calisthenics: Push-Ups, Sit-Ups, and Body Weight Squats.

Here's a sample of what you could do before a strength training session:

- Body Weight Squat x15
- Push-Up with Rotation x10
- Plank :30 Hold

Repeat 2 Times

We're moving our upper and lower body through a full range of motion, at speed, and most importantly, through a range of motion we can control.

Or before going for a run, we might:

- High Knee 25 yds
- Butt Kick 25 yds
- Carioca 25 yds
- Backpedal 25 yds

Functional Flexibility Secrets

Same idea, this warm-up is just a little more specific to our run.

If you want to static stretch, limit it to tight muscles only pre-workout. Post workout, you can static stretch to your heart's content. Actually, this is the best time to increase flexibility.

Now if you're just starting out, this may not be the way to go. You need to have a decent base of core strength and flexibility first. I usually start clients out with a lower intensity static stretch focusing on tight muscle groups and some core activation drills in the beginning. This might sound a bit contradictory to the rest of this post, but if we have areas of our body that are super tight or weak, stretching those areas prior to exercise can be a good thing if it improves our movement.

In summary, a dynamic warm up routine is the best way to get yourself ready for a workout. Static stretching is best done post workout on tight muscle groups only. Again, make sure to refer back to the Ultimate Fitness Resource Manual for how to incorporate the flexibility methods we talked about in this report.

Keep training hard -

Forest Vance, MS, CPT, RKC

<http://www.ultimatefitnessresourcetoolkit.com/>