



limber up

Not stretching before your workout? Then you're missing out on every champion's best kept secret, says **Damien Kelly**.

I'm often asked if I can recommend one type of exercise that requires almost no effort while producing almost every benefit under the sun. Unfortunately, I haven't yet found one (which is why I haven't become a millionaire).

But I have discovered an exercise that comes pretty close – stretching. It's one of the few times you're encouraged to exercise by relaxing and even, sometimes, by lying on your back.

Stretching is the other important piece of the health puzzle. Without it, your body's unable to move as freely as it should, there's constant pressure on tight areas, you have a significantly higher injury risk and you're more susceptible to fatigue.

Everyone – from Olympians to office workers – needs to stretch and can benefit from the resulting increase in flexibility. By stretching, you're counteracting a lot of bad posture that results from just sitting around each day.

Stretching your muscles that feel tight is a great start. "People commonly make the mistake of stretching muscles that don't need stretching and not stretching the ones that do need it," says Paul Chek, author of *How To Eat, Move And Be Healthy* (Highest Quality Health And Fitness). "If you're stretching correctly and you don't feel tightness, that muscle doesn't need that particular stretch."

There are many different forms of stretching. If you're using stretching as part of your comprehensive health routine, then passive stretching is for you. This requires you to move gently into the position, applying a constant stretch (don't bounce). If you feel pain, you've gone too far.

loosen up

Brad Walker, author of *The Stretching Handbook* (Walkabout Health), says that starting some form of flexibility work when you're young pays big dividends in the future," says Walker. "Women tend to be more flexible than men, because of genetics and because as girls they're involved in activities like gymnastics, dancing and aerobics." He says that boys may soon catch up. "Many football codes are incorporating stretching as part of their training."

Don't worry if stretching is new to you. It's still not too late if you haven't started yet. Lanna Levon, 34, a fashion designer from Rosebery in Sydney, didn't start stretching till her late twenties and is now hooked. "I accidentally booked into a yoga class, and now stretch every day," she says. "I learned the stretches from a qualified instructor and now do most of it by myself in the park. I feel horrible without it. The release of stress from my body and the energy boost are addictive."

the flexibility guide

1 warm up A minimum of five minutes cardio is a must before your stretching routine.

2 stretch before and after exercise The pre-workout stretch decreases injury risk and prepares the body for action, while the post stretch increases your flexibility.

3 stretch all the major muscles and their opposing muscle groups In other words, if you stretch your lower body, you need to stretch your upper body as well. If you stretch the front of your thigh, stretch the back too.

4 stretch gently and slowly Don't bounce, as this can cause serious injury.

5 stretch only to the point of tension This one is especially for men. The "No pain, no gain" philosophy does not apply to stretching.

6 breathe slowly and easily Holding your breath causes tense muscles and breathing reminds your body to relax.

abdominals

When you're first attempting this exercise it is advisable to have someone spot you. Sit on a Swiss ball, walk your feet out and roll backwards until you're lying on the ball. Extend your arms over your head. When you're balanced, straighten your legs.

chest

Stand upright. Interlock your fingers. Bend your arms and raise them above your head. Slowly ease your elbows and hands backwards.

Photography: Jodie Burns. **Lanna** wears panelled navy singlet, \$54.99, khaki jazz pants, \$89.99, v-neck khaki singlet, \$64.99, black tai chi pants, \$89.99, all by Running Bare. Call (02) 9663 2111 for stockists.



hamstring (rear thigh)

Lie on your back with your right leg flat on the ground. Pass a rope or towel under the instep of your left foot and straighten the leg. Slowly draw the leg upwards towards your upper body.



quadriceps (front thigh)

Kneel on one foot and one knee. Carefully push your hips forward. If you have difficulty balancing, hold on to something as you stretch. Keep your trunk and upper body upright.



back

Sit on the ground with your legs straight out in front. Keep your toes pointing upwards. Rest your arms by your side and relax your back and neck. With control, slowly let your head and chest fall forward. Feel the stretch. Curl slowly up again.

