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Warming Up Properly

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If you're like me, you have several hobbies that involve a great deal of physical activity, such as hiking, running, biking, riding motocross, in-line skating, etc. You spend hours, even days shopping for the right hiking boots or running shoes, tuning your bike, and rotating the wheels on your in-line skates, but often then you completely forget to prepare your bodies for the physical demands that you're about to place on it. Jumping right into physical activity without warming up is very dangerous. It can lead to an increased injury risk, lack of coordination, and even heart arrhythmias and cardiac arrest in the most serious cases.

You see, your body needs time to adapt to the stress of your workout. This is why a warm up is essential. Physiologically, your heart and lungs need time to adapt to increased oxygen needs associated with your type of physical activity whether it's hiking or working out in the gym. If you simply jump right in to your sport, then you'll notice that you get out of breath almost instantly, that your muscles feel fatigued, you're not as coordinated as you could be and you don't feel 100% focused on your activity. Warming up solves all of these problems by increasing the temperature and pliability of your muscles, giving your heart and lungs a chance to gradually adapt to your increased need for oxygen, and helping your nervous system recognize that you're about to exercise thus improving your coordination.

A good warm up consists of slow, rhythmic activity that gradually increases over a five to ten minute period. For example, I like to start my warm up by walking on the treadmill at 3.0 miles per hour. After two or three minutes, I'll increase my speed to 3.5 miles per hour. After another two or three minutes, I'll once again increase my speed, usually to 4.0 miles per hour. I like to end my warm up with three minutes of walking at 4.3 miles per hour, which is a pretty fast walk for me. You can apply the same principle of gradual intensity increases on a stationary bicycle, stair stepper, elliptical trainer, etc. When I race my dirt bike, I begin my warm up by walking the track. I usually take one or two laps and this helps get my heart rate up and my muscles warm. Then I'll hop on my dirt bike, ride two or three laps with each lap becoming faster than the previous one. This helps to wake up the muscles I'm going to be using during the race. You can follow the same warm up principle for your own sport. Just remember, always start out slow and gradually increase your pace.

If you really want to get ahead in the sport you're participating in, try some mild stretching after your warm up. Just remember never stretch a cold muscle!

Researchers are beginning to tell people that they can't prove that stretching before your workout prevents injuries, however, it can affect your performance. If you're like me, you tend to wake up in the morning pretty stiff. Even after a warm up, you may still feel tight. Stretching after your warm up can help alleviate this tightness and further prepare your body for your specific activity by taking each body part through a full range of motion and "loosening" it up.

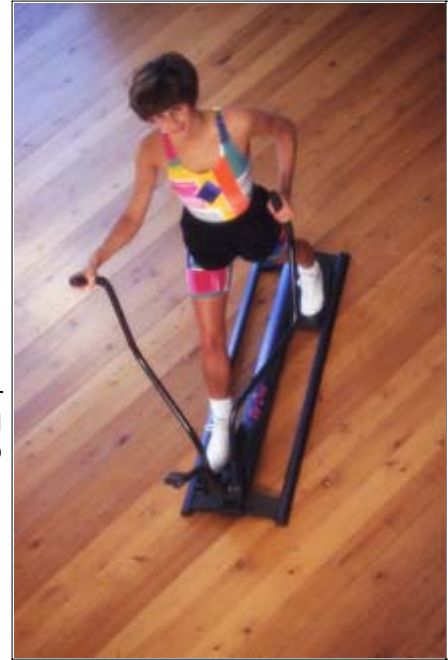
When you stretch before your workout, you'll want to stretch your major muscle groups and any muscles associated with the activity that you are about to participate in. For example, with golf, it's important to stretch your legs, but don't neglect your arms and your back since most golf injuries tend to be back injuries.

Here are some stretches that you can start with. You will want to add other muscle group stretches depending on the sport or activity that you are participating in. Hold each stretch without bouncing for 10-20 seconds. You should feel a mild pull, but you shouldn't feel any pain and your stretch should not be uncomfortable.

QUADRICEPS: The big beautiful muscles on the front of your upper legs.

Try to balance on one foot while doing this exercise. Bend your knee so that your heel is almost touching your rear end. Grab onto your ankle and gently pull your ankle towards your rear making sure to keep your knee pointed straight to the ground. If you feel any stress on your knee, then you know you're doing this stretch wrong. Stop immediately and try again! Be sure to repeat this stretch on the other leg.

HAMSTRINGS: The wonderful muscles on the back of your upper leg.



Lay on your back. Bend one leg and place that foot flat on the ground. Extend your other leg straight up, without locking your knee. Gently pull the extended leg towards your chest.

CALF MUSCLES: The back of your lower leg

Find a wall or other flat vertical surface. Try to place your entire foot on the wall so that your heel remains in contact with the ground. Lean forward slightly. Repeat with each leg.

ABS AND BACK:

Stand with your feet about a shoulder's width apart, knees slightly bent, reach your hands up over your head as high as you can, place one hand on your hip and then lean over towards your supporting arm. Repeat on both sides.

OTHER AREAS TO STRETCH:

Depending on your activity, you should stretch your neck, chest, upper back, triceps (back of your upper arm), shoulders, etc. The important thing is to make sure that you have stretched each of the muscles that you're going to use during your activity.

SHOULDERS:

Grab your hands behind your back and lift them straight up. You don't need to bend over to get a good stretch, but if you choose to, you'll stretch even more muscles and it'll feel really good.

TRICEPS:

Bend one arm back over your head, keep your elbow close to your head and gently push down so that your hand creeps down your back. Do not strain your neck on this one. Your neck should remain in a neutral position. Repeat with each arm.

NECK:

Look down and put your chin on your chest. Next, look to the left, hold, and then look to the right and hold. Finally, tilt your head to the left, hold, and then tilt it to the right and hold.

Warming up and stretching before your activity might seem like a lot to think about when all you want to do is go, but trust me, it's worth the effort. In ten to fifteen minutes, you can warm your muscles, prepare your brain, heart and lungs for exercise, and loosen up tight muscles all of which will help to prevent injuries (associated with not properly warming up) and improve your performance.

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