

Is Your Guitar Out of Tune:
A Word on

flexibility

By Brandon Mentore

There are many questions regarding flexibility such as: how long it should be done, who should do it, and should it be done before or after exercise. There are some considerations to take into account when stretching. First your body is like a guitar, it has to be tuned properly and be in balance in order for it to perform properly.

- The first thing you should do is identify the tight muscles in your body. There is no sense in stretching a stretched muscle, as this will only further imbalance you. You wouldn't continue to tune a guitar if it was already tuned. Stretch the tight muscles and strengthen the loose muscles to bring your body into balance. It's important to remember that when you stretch or lengthen a muscle in a static manner, the electrical impulses going through that muscle decrease, causing a type of sedation in the muscle. If optimal strength is a necessary component for a particular exercise you're doing (i.e. power lift), it's not wise to stretch that muscle in between sets you'll just figuratively put it to sleep. You want to keep that muscle fired up for the next set.

However, if you are just working a general muscle that happens to be chronically tight, stretching in between sets is advisable to offset the shortening of the muscle that occurs with the contraction from that exercise.

- Secondly, it's not wise to do an all out stretch routine first and then perform a workout. Your core body temperature is low at that point and needs to be warmed up so that the joints are loose and pliable and ready to be stretched. It's also important that the warm-up be specific to what you are doing. For example, jogging on the treadmill for five minutes before squatting or bench pressing is an inferior warm-up activity. You're better off squatting or pressing with a lighter load.

- Next it's important to understand the difference between flexibility

and mobility (also known as dynamic flexibility as opposed to static). Your ability to move your joints and muscles through a particular range of motion like the squat is a much different action than lying on the floor and stretching your hamstring. The carryover from stretching muscles on the floor is often times not enough to perform an exercise using those same muscles. The dynamic component is more involved. Thus it is important to understand which type of flexibility you need.

- Another consideration is your systemic flexibility. As you may know some people are just naturally flexible while many are tight as drums. Depending on the individual, you will be either hypermobile (loose) or hypomobile (tight). Hypermobile individuals are the ones in the yoga classes, doing Pilates and stretching those legs behind their head. The ability to simply perform the poses and exercises will motivate a hypermobile person much more than a hypomobile person. However, the looser a person is, the more systemically unstable they are at the joint and ligament level. These types of people can dislocate their shoulder and pop it right back in with no problem. Their joints have a great deal of laxity and are usually hyper mobile at a systemic level. People that are hypermobile have to be very careful with stretching and yoga type classes; if you're already loose you will exacerbate instability and possibly produce an injury. Strength training is the best option for a hypermobile person while hypomobile people should engage in yoga type classes and stretching regularly. Both types of people can experience injury or pain from a tight body or a loose, unstable body. A power lifter and a yoga instructor can both experience low back pain but for entirely opposite reasons. The power lifter may be too tight and the yoga instructor may be too loose.

- Finally muscles exhibit a protective behavior. There are a number of reasons why a muscle becomes tight. If there is any instability at the joint or ligament level, the surrounding musculature around that joint will tighten or even spasm to prevent injury. Therefore, it's not always wise to start stretching muscles without any rhyme or reason as you could be advancing the phases that lead up to injury.



Flexibility is not just a cut and dry issue. There are a multitude of factors to consider. Utilizing a skilled trainer or therapist can help you tune in to exactly what you need to do to increase your flexibility. Tune that body up like a guitar and you'll be surprised at the beautiful music you can play with it.



Brandon Mentore, NASM-PES, ACE-CPT, USA Track and Field Club coach, is the Fitness Director of the Union League of Philadelphia. He has been in the fitness industry for 10 years. He holds a B.S. in Kinesiology from Temple University and is a trained practitioner of the C.H.E.K. Institute based in San Diego. He has consulted with numerous clientele in all aspects of Health and Wellness. He is also an Expert Personal Trainer at the Sporting Club at the Bellevue and has been working there for eight years. Contact BrandonMentore@phillyfitmagazine.com.