

Warm-up and stretching

Some people won't think twice about starting right into their training with no more complicated a warm-up than a couple of jumps shaking the head and arms about a bit. Others wouldn't dream of so much as taking their first step without a full 30 minute session of deep breathing, comprehensive stretching and a slow warm-up aerobic session. So what's it all about? Should we stretch/warm-up or not? Will it prevent injuries, help us improve performance, or is it just a waste of time?

The answer is there is no black and white answer. There is no evidence in the scientific literature that warm-up and stretching sessions prevent injury across the board, or that they improve performance in everyone. Despite this, it has become an accepted fact that a balanced exercise programme will include stretches and warm-ups. But we can say that there is no evidence that they do any harm. If they do help, it is probably because they increase the body temperature slowly and comfortably, slowly increase the flexibility of soft tissue and last but not least, psychologically prepare the person for involvement in the actual activity. Outside of this a good warm down may be useful in preventing severe delayed onset muscle soreness (DOMS) that can occur 24-48 hours after a heavy bout of exercise. This may be due to a continued low level of increased blood flow through the muscles carrying away the lactic acid that is produced during exercise and preventing it staying in the muscle to cause pain the next day.

All the above applies to the healthy person. For people who have long standing, recurrent injuries or who are returning to sport after injury a warm-up and down as well as stretching programme will be more important.

So assuming you're going to warm-up/down and stretch, how to do it all? Again there are a wide range of recommendations out there but a sensible programme would include the following:

- 5-10 minutes of low but increasing aerobic exercise (e.g. slow walking for walkers, fast walking for joggers)
- 5-10 minutes of stretches for the muscle groups mainly used in the sport (mainly leg muscles for walk/run: thigh, calf and bum muscles). As a general rule, hold each stretch for 10-30 seconds and repeat 3-5 times in a row.
- Then start your endurance aerobic phase, walk, run etc, This is your main fitness segment
- Finally 5-10 minutes of a reduced aerobic exercise, e.g. your slow walking, fast walking, as you started. You can, if you like, finish with stretches.

For details on exactly how to do particular stretches, check these websites:
Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists: www.iscp.ie, also try www.physioroom.com,
and the American College of Sports Medicine at www.acsm.org

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