

Injury Prevention

Warm-up and cool-down activities, along with stretching exercises, are often ignored components in a physical fitness routine, but they are vital steps to a complete healthy fitness program.

Remember:

What you wear during your workout is just as important as the workout itself. An ill-fitting outfit can make the difference between a good workout and a bad one.

Wear light, loose clothing to help sweat evaporate.

A proper warm-up is necessary to prepare your body for exercising and to reduce the potential for muscle strain and injury. A warm-up period should be a mild version of the activity you are going to perform and last at least 10 minutes. For example, if you are planning to jog, then walk or ride a stationary bicycle for 10 minutes before you begin. Keep in mind to stay at a pace that is 50 percent of your maximum heart rate.

You can also begin by walking while gently pumping your arms to warm up.

Like the warm-up, the cool-down activity is a mild version of the exercise you performed. The cool-down time gives your heart rate and breathing a chance to return to normal levels and reduces muscle stiffness. When you are done with your exercise routine, walk slowly for 10 to 15 minutes. You also want to stretch your muscles gently.

Stretching helps reduce the risk of injury, strengthens your joints and increases your range of movement. A perfect time to stretch is after your warm-up and cool-down, because your muscles are already warm. Stretching also increases the blood flow to your muscles, improving circulation. Improving your circulation can help shorten your recovery time if you've had any muscle injuries.

Be sure to hold each stretch for at least 30 seconds and up to 60 seconds for a tight muscle or problem area. It takes time to lengthen tissues safely.

A common mistake while stretching is bouncing. Bouncing as you stretch can cause small tears in the muscle, which leave scar tissue as the muscle heals. The scar tissue tightens the muscle even further, making you less flexible and more prone to pain.

For more information about warm-ups, cool-downs and finding your target heart rate, go to www.texercise.com/resources/handbook/english/fitnesslevel.html

For stretching exercises, go to www.texercise.com/resources/handbook/english/flexibility.html