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Methods for maximizing flexibility

We tend to think of young athletes as naturally flexible but in truth athletes of all ages can improve performance for sports by maximizing flexibility. In very simplistic terms, think of your muscles and tendons as elastic structures like rubber bands.

A stretchy rubber band is generally capable of greater motion and power than a cold, stiff rubber band. You want your muscles and tendons to be as long and flexible as possible, which usually leads to better strength, power, speed, agility, and even lower injury rates.

But there is considerable debate about what the "best" and safest method is to improve flexibility for young athletes. Back in the 1960s and 1970s we started every practice session with a series of stretch-and-hold moves (called "static stretches"), and then went on to activities involving movement. But over the past several years the pendulum has moved the other way. It's now known that "flexibility" is much better and safer through exercises done with movement, called "dynamic stretching." We also know that it's harmful to stretch a cold muscle.

Here are some general guidelines for dynamic stretching that can be useful in most sports and age groups:

1. Start with a 3-5 minute easy jog. The purpose of this part of your activity is to get the body warmed up and reduce risk of injury. As I said above, don't move to stretches without doing a warm-up first.

Depending on the sport and your environment you could also do a line-to-line jog, a lateral shuttle run, and backward running.

1. Move next into dynamic stretching. There are many, many different types of dynamic stretches. Coaches of different sports will have their favorites for their sport, so what is outlined here is a very general guideline:

- A. Straight-leg marching -- for hamstrings and glutes.
- B. Butt-kicks -- for quadriceps.
- C. Forward shuffle with hip rotation -- for groin/adductors.
- D. Scorpion cross-over stretch lying on your back -- for lower back and hip abductors.
- E. Handwalks -- for shoulders, core abdominals.

If you'd like to see some photos of a simple version of dynamic stretching for adults take a look at the [Core Performance](#) website. The folks at Core Performance refer to this phase as Movement Preparation and you can get a good idea of the types of movements we're talking about above. (I have no relationship with Core Performance, I just really like what they do.) For soccer players, I highly recommend the Santa Monica Sports Medicine [PEP program](#).

And finally, old-fashioned static (stretch and hold position) stretches can be done as part of the cool-down after activity.

Static stretches haven't disappeared completely, they just come at the end of the training session rather than right at the beginning. There are literally hundreds of ways to do static stretching, and many sport-specific stretches. Here's a bare minimum of stretches that target most of the muscle groups. For each of these you want the kids to hold for about 30 seconds and do 2 or 3 repetitions of each stretch.

1. Upper-body stretches

- A. Across body shoulder stretch
- B. Triceps back-scratcher stretch
- C. Lower back stretch
 - i. Rocking on all fours
- D. Lower body stretches
 - i. Calf/Achilles stretch
 - ii. Quadriceps stretch -- standing
 - iii. Figure four hamstring stretch
 - iv. Inner thigh/adductor stretch
 - v. Hip flexor stretch

Right now you might be saying "this would be a lot better with pictures and more detailed descriptions ..." And you're right! So I encourage you to take a look at [Core Performance](#) and the [PEP program](#).

(Dev K. Mishra is the creator of the [SidelineSportsDoc.com](#) injury management program for coaches. He is an orthopedic surgeon in private practice in Burlingame, Calif. He is a member of the team physician pool with the U.S. Soccer Federation and has served as team physician at the University of California, Berkeley. This article first appeared on [SidelineSportsDoc.com](#).)