Stay Young by Staying Flexible

By Dr. Ramona Warren

Have you ever woken up in the morning and experienced stiffness in your back that makes it difficult to stand upright or walk? After about 10 to 15 minutes of moving around the stiffness begins to settle down and you can move more freely. When you experience this type of scenario you are feeling the effects of a loss of flexibility.

There is an old Chinese proverb that says, “You are as young as you are flexible.” One clear sign of aging is the loss of flexibility. If you want to reduce your risk of injury and increase your quality of life, it is vital that you work on becoming more flexible. According to David Geier, the director of sports medicine at the Medical University of South Carolina, “Flexibility is the third pillar of fitness, next to cardiovascular conditioning and strength training.”

Not only does increased flexibility help improve your fitness levels, studies show increased flexibility can help in the prevention of arthritis and the reduction of lower back pain. When our joints and soft tissues are more flexible it improves our range of motion (ROM). An increased ROM puts less stress on joints, ligaments and tendons, therefore reducing our risk of injury.

For golfers, flexibility is the most important factor in a successful and enjoyable golf game. When you remain limber and flexible, you are able to turn your shoulders to the 90-degree angle over the hips, which should rotate 45-degrees. This allows for increased power and distance. When muscles and joints become tight and stiff, range of motion decreases and the ability to swing successfully through the ball is lost. This places the golfer at a higher risk of injury, especially when the golfer tries to swing harder in an attempt to increase his distance. Swinging harder with less flexibility causes micro tears in the soft tissues, which weakens the muscles and the discs, and can lead to tendonitis and bulging discs.

Many patients claim no matter what they do their muscles remain tight and their joints stiff. Some say they have had tight hamstrings or poor flexibility their entire lives and assume that is just the way they will always be. However, it is possible for anyone to increase flexibility – and it’s imperative for good health.

But it doesn’t happen overnight. Improving flexibility takes time and effort and must be done on a regular basis. The American College of Sports Medicine recommends stretching a minimum of two days per week, while others believe we need to stretch daily, even twice a day. The more often you stretch, the quicker you will see results. Find what type of stretching schedule works best for you and begin adding stretching as part of your fitness routine.

There are a multitude of stretches and finding the right routine for you depends on the types of activities you perform. A golfer should focus on different stretches than someone who works at a desk all day. There are many stretching resources available in bookstores, as well as stretching routines available through online sources such as YouTube.

When stretching, it is always best to stretch a warm muscle, so make sure to do some light cardiovascular activity such as walking, stationary bike, jumping jacks, jumping rope or running in place. Doing one of these activities for five to 10 minutes will get the blood circulating and warm the muscle. Also, make sure NOT to “bounce” the muscle when stretching, since this can injure the tissue. A slow, gentle stretch is much better for the muscles and joints. Hold each stretch for at least 20 seconds and up to 60 seconds. The stretch should not be painful and should not cause the muscle to shake. You should feel a mild stretch that you can maintain for the desired length of time.

Once you consistently begin incorporating stretching into your fitness routine, flexibility should begin to improve within two weeks. The changes may be small in the beginning but, as you continue, you will start to notice an increased ROM of the muscles and joints. For those who are golfers, you will often see the difference on the course in less than 30 days. Also, keep in mind not everyone will be able to achieve the same level of flexibility. You might not become a yoga master or be able to join Cirque du Soleil, but small improvements in flexibility can still go a long way toward good health and a more youthful body.

As your flexibility increases you will notice you have less pain, less muscle soreness and a feeling of well-being and vitality. Your health improves, your quality of life improves and you begin to add life to your years. You truly can feel younger by staying flexible.