

# Does stretching before exercise prevent injury?

Does stretching before exercise really help prevent injury? Or is it just stretching the truth and a waste of time?

Reporter Michael Slater limbers up to find out.

Before going out to do sporting battle we often limber up with a series of stretches, the idea being that we don't want to tear or strain a muscle.

The idea of stretching before exercise took off at the very first modern Olympic Games in Athens in 1896. But it was the '40s where stretching really made its mark, since then it's something that's been perpetuated by fitness training circles.

But is stretching before exercise really going to help prevent injury?

## **Test one**

The men at Sydney's Radio Physics Cricket Club offered to participate in a test to see if stretching before playing really does offer some benefit. This knockabout group of Aussie blokes are an average age of 35 and have all been playing cricket for decades. Within in the group, the jury is still out on the stretching theory. No one knows whether limbering up beforehand is going to help them during the game. So, before they hit the cricket pitch, half of the group have a proper stretch while the other half don't.

Interestingly, it is among the 'stretchers' group that the most previous injuries have seemed to occurred, such as torn muscles. At least three of the non-stretchers claimed never to have suffered any kind of injury.

## **Test two**

While the cricket boys take to the pitch, Michael set off to play a set of tennis with friend Tony. Tony has volunteered to stretch before the game, while Michael chooses not to.

## **Results**

### **Test one**

It's game over for the cricketers and no one from either team is limping off the field.

### **Test two**

Back at the tennis court, Michael and Tony have completed their set of tennis. So how does Tony feel after completing all the stretching beforehand? He feels fine — albeit a bit hot and sweaty, but no pulls, injuries or strains.

So both tests revealed no injuries.

Health and fitness expert Rod Pope at Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga has carried out some breakthrough tests on stretching, using 2600 army recruits as his guinea pigs. The soldiers were put through 50 hours of training where one group stretched before each session of exercise, while the other group did no warm ups at all.

The result? The same as ours earlier, results of the studies showed that it really made no difference whether soldiers stretched or not — both groups were injured at same rate.

So do these results mean we shouldn't stretch at all?

According to Rod Pope it's quite important to differentiate between stretching during warm up and warm up itself.

"There's some evidence that warm up is quite important to prevent injury in athletes, but stretching is just one component of a warm up and so when we say stretching is not of much value we need to be careful not to throw out warm up along with stretching," he says.

Physiotherapist Clare Walsh is on the same track as Rod Pope: "I think it's fairly well recognised now through the research that stretching before sport doesn't necessarily prevent you from injuring yourself while you're playing sport in that game, but I think that improving your flexibility overall in the long-term can definitely prevent injury because it prevents muscle imbalances occurring."

Claire is also the physio for the Sydney Swans. Here are some tips that you need to do to warm up and stretch before sporting activity:

- Stretching isn't the same as warming up, therefore, you need to get those muscles heated by running on the spot or gently jogging.
- Now you can start stretching, but not a static stretch. Stretches should be dynamic — have some movement in them.
- Finally, remember to cool down with some stretching.

So, when you get on field for your next game, make sure you do a warm-up: jog up and down on the spot, run around the block, hit a few balls — anything before starting your stretches.

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