

To Stretch or not to Stretch.....that is the question

When I was a young athlete, my coaches always told us to stretch and warm up properly before we exercised to help prevent injury. Our warm-ups consisted of running a lap around the field and then sitting and doing some sort of static stretching for 15 minutes. At the time, this was believed to be the best way to prepare our bodies for vigorous exercise. Times have changed.

Over the last few years, research has shown that this type of static stretching for warm up is not the most effective way of preparing the athlete for a practice or game. In fact, standing still and stretching your muscles prior to a game or practice has not been shown to decrease the risk of injury. Actually, some researchers say that static stretching before exercise may increase the risk of injury.

The best way to warm up for a game or practice is to follow a dynamic warm up. A dynamic warm up consists of gradually warming your muscles and joints by performing a series of controlled movements and stretches. This allows your joints, muscles, tendons and ligaments to work through their full ranges of motion while simulating the movements that your body will experience during your sporting activity. Below is a sample of a dynamic warm up. Perform 2 sets of each with each set being about 10-15 yards.

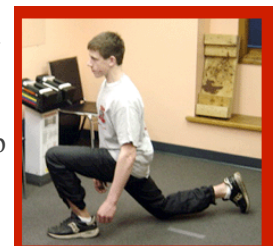
Injury Preventing Dynamic Warm Up

1) 5-10 minute easy jog or bike

- 2) **High knee walks**- when performing the high knee walk it is important to keep your head up, back straight and slowly and intentionally pull your leg up to your chest as you walk. Pull the leg up to your chest as high as possible and do not lower your chest to your leg.



- 3) **Lunges**- to perform the lunge start in a standing position and simply step out in an exaggerated stride and lower your hips to the floor. You should feel a stretch in the groin/hip flexor area. Make sure your knee does not pass the toes and make sure to keep your head up and back straight.



- 4) **Butt kicks**- this is a dynamic warm-up for the hips, quads and hip flexors. Begin running in a forward direction. With each step you will kick your butt with your heel. Perform this very quickly kicking your butt and then lowering it as quickly as possible.



- 5) **Frankenstein kicks**-or straight leg toe touches are a great way to stretch the hamstrings/buttocks in a dynamic way. It will also help increase stride length by teaching the joints and associated musculature to increase the hip range of motion



- 6) **Side to side shuffles (lateral slides) with arm swings**- Start in the standing position with your knees slightly bent. Hips and shoulders are square and facing directly forward. Keeping your toes straight ahead and maintaining the bent knee position step out to the side. You should feel a stretch in the groin area.



- 7) **Walking/Running Cross Overs (Carioca)**- you can start this drill by walking and then progressing to a run. Cross one leg over in front of the other and then cross the same leg over behind the other leg.



- 8) **Backpedaling**- keep a slight bend in your knees and your weight over the balls of your feet.
- 9) **High knee runs**-keep an upright posture and pump your arms and legs as quickly as possible trying to touch the ground as many times as you can.
- 10) **5 X 50 yds** run at 75% maximum speed

Static stretching is still recommended but at the end of your workout to maintain your flexibility and to help cool your body down.

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