

Self Care Exercises

First Tension Stretching



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Keys to Stretching

Of the four key areas of physical activity, flexibility training is by far the most critical. Stretching should be woven in with aerobic conditioning, resistance training and core stabilization. One of the challenges with stretching is sorting through the diverse opinions that exist about the appropriate way to stretch. The more confusing issue to the uneducated and educated alike is that many of these different opinions are correct in different circumstances. For the stretches provided to you during your care in this office the procedure we recommend you follow is called ‘first tension stretching’.

To understand ‘first tension stretching’ you need to understand that there are two major elements that make up your muscle; the contractile element and the elastic element. These components should work in concert to allow for ease of motion. During regular motion the elastic element stretches and recoils like a sling-shot allowing the contractile element to have some momentum and contract with less effort. Without adequate flexibility the elastic part of the muscle is ineffective and the contractile element has to do more work. The more the contractile element has to work the more energy is used and more breakdown occurs in the muscle. Muscle breakdown creates chemical byproducts that produce the sensation of pain. This pain is what is normally felt if a muscle is used in a new and unique way but should not be felt if a muscle is used in a typical and frequent manner.

During stretching the goal is to warm up the elastic element while minimally involving the contractile element. Many people stretch much too aggressively and unknowingly breakdown the contractile element creating a pain cycle that they don’t recognize. When doing ‘first tension stretching’ the concept is that you bring your muscle only to the point of the stretch where the first slight tension is felt. This tension should release within 15-30 seconds if done properly. The stretch can then be repeated and the ‘first tension’ location should have moved further into the range of motion allowed by the muscle.

The misconception that a stretch should be held for 30 seconds should be replaced by the idea that a stretch should release within that same 30 seconds so that no more tension is felt at that range of motion. The stretch can then be repeated for as many repetitions as time allows. A very tight muscle can be worked through this way, whereas a properly conditioned muscle may only require one or two cycles of this sort of stretching to get an appropriate elastic stretch.

All static stretching should be done following a short warm-up of 2-5 minutes to avoid injury or complication. Gentle movements within the range of motion of the joint/muscle you are about to work on can accomplish this in a simple and pain free manner.