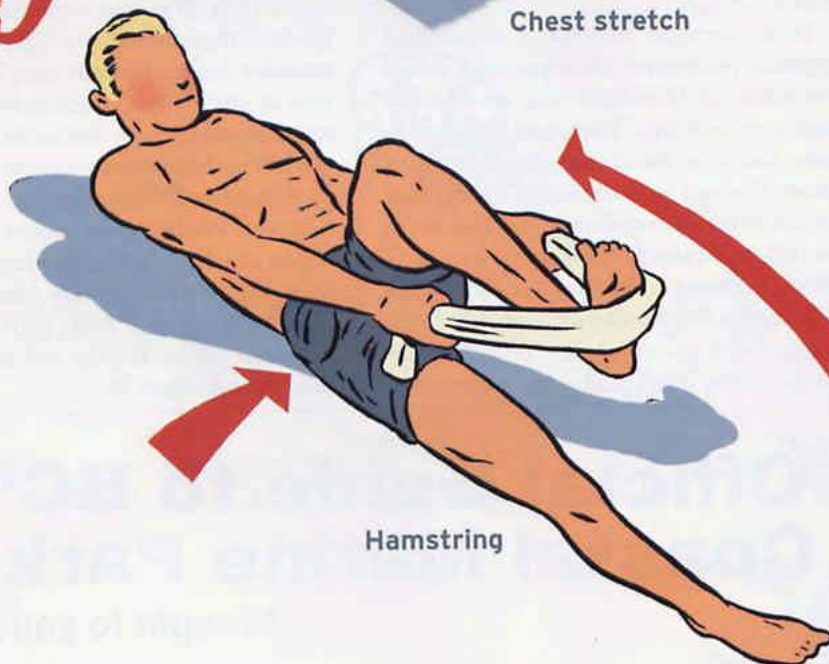


Chest stretch



Hamstring

The Tao of Stretching

GET READY TO LOOSEN UP WITH THE BASICS OF WHY, WHEN AND HOW TO STRETCH

The serenity of a calm, blue lake, a particularly beguiling bike terrain or the first fresh powder of the season may be alluring enough to lead any avid athlete to jump right into a favourite sport, foregoing an essential element of any physical activity — the graceful, and crucial art of stretching.

We've all been there. In our enthusiasm to scale that mountain or dip our paddle into cool waters, we tell ourselves a short walk is warm-up enough. It's only when the onset of screaming muscles, poor performance or a nagging injury creep in that the neglectful athlete gets a lesson never to be forgotten.

GETTING LOOSE

According to Vancouver-based physiotherapist Scott Fraser, spokesperson for the Canadian Physiotherapy Association, stretching before and after athletic activity has more value than just preventing post-exercise aches.

"Stretching as a warm-up and as a cool-down helps you to move easily, keeps your muscles flexible and relaxed and your joints mobile. It's an imperative component to

any athletic activity," Fraser explains. He says there are three key reasons to take the time to properly stretch:

- Warm muscles can attenuate shock and impact, (e.g. a hard landing on your mountain bike) preparing them to take a hit without causing muscle tears or injury.

- Preparing for your activity allows your mind and body time to make a connection, giving your body the ability to react to quick movements and readying your mind for the terrain ahead, which can help prevent mishaps.

- Post-stretching helps create flexibility over the long-term, allowing for the most power, the most efficiency and the best posture as you evolve as an athlete.

Toronto's Rob Millar, a conditioning coach for endurance athletes, adventure racers and triathletes, agrees that a proper stretching routine is essential for most types of activity.

"I advocate dynamic stretching and a warm up before any type of sport that requires endurance. This generally entails gentle, rhythmic movements that mimic the activity you're going to do, gradually increasing the range of motion and speed until you're up to doing exactly what you'll do in your sport."

Taking the muscles through a range of motion also allows you to feel for any injuries or tension that you don't notice in ordinary life. When it comes to technique, Fraser agrees that experts are shying away from static-stretching before activity, such as bending and touching your toes for a minute or pulling a leg behind you and touching a wall.

"We're now recommending more of a dynamic warm-up, allowing your muscles to warm and getting your body ready to react quickly to movement, [such as] jumping jacks, leg swings, [or] straddle hops," he says.

Both experts agree that five to 10 minutes of warm-up — "Just enough to get the beginning of a sweat," says Millar — followed by 15 to 20 minutes of stretching that mimics your activity is sufficient for preparing your body for most types of activity.

Post-exercise, they suggest spending 15 to 20 minutes of stretching — involving slower, longer stretches of the muscles you used most (mountain bikers would



Quadriceps

Limber Up

The following active isolated stretches are beneficial for most outdoor solo sport activities, including mountain biking, kayaking, climbing and skiing. "These are unique stretches in that, though they are common enough, most people may not be accustomed to doing them in this way. Active isolated stretching is a nervous system trick to make muscles work in harmony," says Millar. For each stretch, relax your breathing, use slow movements, hold for one second and repeat 10 times.

Chest stretch: Lay on your back on a bench, with hands stretched out in front of you at chest level. Open your arms out to the sides as far as possible and rotate hands until your palms are facing up. Hold for one second and bring back to centre.


Hamstring: Lying on your back with one end of a towel in each hand, wrap the towel over your left foot. Your right leg should be extended on the floor. Draw your left foot up, aiming your leg straight, squeeze your quad muscles at the end of the movement and hold for one second before lowering to the floor.

Quadriceps: Lying on your left side, knees bent in front of you, grasp your right ankle and gently draw your right leg back into a quad stretch position (your heel should be extending toward your bum). Hold for one second, squeezing your quad, and then bring back to start position. Repeat same number on your left leg.

Upper back: With feet shoulder width apart and knees slightly bent, place your left hand on your left hip and extend your right hand straight over your head. Slowly lean your upper body slightly to the left. Repeat on your right side.

For more information on customizing a stretching routine to your activity, consult a physiotherapist or personal trainer knowledgeable of your sport.

stretch calves, hamstrings, quadriceps, back and glutes, for example), followed by 10 minutes of cool down (a light ride, slow kayak, easy walk or leisurely jog) to clear away any lingering metabolites and lactic acid in the muscles. Millar also advises incorporating active isolated stretches into your routine, which involves using the muscles of the opposite muscle group to relax the muscle you want to target.

As outdoor adventure beckons, clearly it's worthwhile to take a few moments to prepare your body for activity, enhance your performance and spare yourself the agony of pulled muscles. Live and learn. 



Upper back

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