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INVITED EDITORIAL

Static stretching: an effective tool for better health

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Modern lifestyles are increasingly characterized by prolonged sitting, unhealthy dietary habits, and insufficient physical activity, making physical inactivity one of the leading modifiable risk factors for poor health. This behavioral shift contributes to overweight and obesity, cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, stroke, and other chronic non-communicable diseases. Alongside regular physical activity, maintaining adequate mobility represents an essential yet often overlooked component of long-term health. Efficient human movement depends largely on the available range of motion within synovial joints,[1] and insufficient physical activity may impair muscle function, restrict joint mobility, and ultimately compromise overall health status.[2]

Because mobility is fundamental to performing everyday activities efficiently and independently, preserving or improving flexibility should be considered an essential component of a physically active lifestyle. In this context, stretching exercises may play a particularly important role as a simple, accessible, and practical strategy for maintaining musculoskeletal function and promoting long-term health.

Among the various stretching modalities, static stretching stands out as one of the most practical and versatile approaches, with considerable potential for promoting public health. Static stretching is defined as a controlled movement to the end range of motion of one or more joints, where the target muscle or muscle group is held in a lengthened position for a predetermined period.[3] It can be classified as either active or passive. Active static stretching involves maintaining the stretched position through voluntary contraction of the agonist muscles, whereas passive static stretching relies on an external force – such as gravity, a partner, equipment (for example elastic bands),[4] or the individual's opposite limb – to maintain the desired position. In clinical practice, recreational exercise, and daily fitness routines, passive static stretching is generally the more commonly performed technique. It allows the stretching stimulus to be precisely controlled without excessive muscular effort, facilitating relaxation of the target musculature. One of the greatest advantages of passive static stretching is its simplicity and accessibility, as it has no competitive component, eliminating the need for comparison with others and potentially reducing psychological barriers to participation. Furthermore, each individual can easily adjust the intensity and duration of stretching according to their own physical capacity and functional abilities, making it suitable for people of all ages and fitness levels. Paradoxically, the very simplicity and accessibility of static stretching may have contributed to its underrepresentation in broader health promotion strategies, despite its growing evidence base and practical applicability across diverse populations.

One of the greatest health-related benefits of static stretching is its ability to improve flexibility. Adequate flexibility is essential for maintaining optimal musculoskeletal function, whereas reduced flexibility has been identified as an important contributor to muscle and joint pain.[5]

Moreover, flexibility has been shown to decline progressively between 20 and 49 years of age,[6] with an average reduction of approximately 10% per decade.[7] Such declines may negatively affect the performance of daily activities and reduce quality of life in adulthood,[8] highlighting the importance of preserving optimal flexibility as a fundamental component of lifelong health.[7,9] Beyond improvements in flexibility and range of motion, evidence from our previous systematic review has highlighted broader clinical applications of static stretching, including reductions in work-related musculoskeletal disorders, improvements in respiratory muscle function following stroke rehabilitation, and benefits within preventive strategies during pregnancy, such as reducing the risk of pre-eclampsia.[2] These findings illustrate that the potential value of static stretching extends beyond exercise settings into diverse clinical and public health contexts.

When prescribing static stretching, one of the most important practical considerations is the duration for which each stretch should be maintained. Current evidence suggests that holding a static stretch for 15 to 30 seconds is sufficient to produce meaningful improvements in flexibility and range of motion.[10] Importantly, time constraints should not discourage participation in stretching exercises. Even a single bout of static stretching may provide measurable benefits, indicating that the positive effects of stretching remain attainable even when only a limited amount of time is available. This accessibility further supports the role of static stretching as a practical strategy for promoting long-term musculoskeletal health.

Despite its simplicity and growing evidence base, static stretching remains underrepresented in public health messaging. This likely reflects the historical emphasis on athletic performance, limited awareness of its broader clinical applications, and the tendency for flexibility training to receive less attention than aerobic and resistance exercise. Addressing these implementation barriers may encourage greater integration of static stretching into everyday health promotion strategies. For this reason, the present perspective focuses on the broader health-promoting role of static stretching rather than its sport-specific application within warm-up protocols or performance optimization.

Collectively, the available evidence, research findings, and clinical experience suggest that static stretching represents a simple yet effective strategy for preserving mobility, maintaining musculoskeletal health, and supporting overall well-being. Although it should not be viewed as a substitute for aerobic or resistance exercise, static stretching deserves greater recognition as an essential component of a comprehensive approach to health promotion across the lifespan. Whether performed by athletes, recreationally active individuals, or those who are largely sedentary, regular static stretching can help maintain or improve flexibility, facilitate comfortable movement, and support the performance of everyday activities. Most importantly, it demonstrates that meaningful health benefits do not always require complex interventions – sometimes, a few minutes of consistent stretching each day may represent one of the simplest investments we can make in our long-term health. Recognizing this opportunity may be one of the simplest ways to strengthen the role of flexibility within future health promotion strategies.

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