Stretching debate continues

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LA TIMES-WASHINGTON POST

It's been a long, hard day at the office, and you need a good workout to blow off all that stress. But before you hit the free weights, the stationary bike or the elliptical machine, you spend 10 minutes carefully stretching all those stiff muscles, just as every coach, trainer and physical therapist has advised for as long as you can remember.

The question is why.

There's no evidence that you'll prevent injury. In fact, some people believe you're more likely to cause one. You won't stave off muscle soreness. You won't perform better. There's some reason to believe you'll do worse than if you hadn't stretched.

"There is not sufficient evidence to endorse or discontinue routine stretching before or after exercise to prevent injury among competitive or recreational athletes," concluded the National Center for Injury Prevention Control, part of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in a 2004 study.

Range of motion helped

Before you go out and tear a cold hamstring, let's back up. Research and anecdotal information attribute many benefits to stretching: reduced muscle tension, improved circulation, pain reduction and management. Perhaps most important, stretching helps maintain range of motion as we age.

The question is whether "static stretching" — the most common type, which involves holding a muscle in one position for a defined period of time — has been misinterpreted, or oversold, as a preventive for what ails you.

"People believe all kinds of amazing things, and it changes every 10 or 15 years," said William Meller, a physician and associate professor of evolutionary medicine at the University of California at Santa Barbara, who sees even less value in stretching than the CDC does. The merits of stretching are "not based on any science. It's based on word of mouth. It's spread by coaches, spread by trainers, (by) all kinds of different people who have an interest in pretending to be experts."

According to Julie Gilchrist, a medical epidemiologist who helped conduct the CDC study, "It's probably important that we maintain some norm of flexibility throughout our life spans, but I don't think anyone has really defined what that norm is."

"Our belief is that there are probably people who would benefit from stretching. But then the question is who should stretch, when to stretch," how much to stretch and, most important, what benefits can be expected.

Even for the elderly, "We don't have the kind of controlled intervention studies that we need to make a definitive statement about the benefits of doing flexibility exercises," said Chhanda Dutta, chief of the clinical gerontology branch at the National Institute on Aging. "We're not able to tell the elderly exactly the ways it can help them."

Similarly, coaches across the country wouldn't dream of putting athletes on a field, even for practice, without a battery of stretches.

"As a coach, if I didn't do that and somebody got hurt, I would probably have a tough time sleeping at night," said Paul Foringer, the varsity boys basketball and junior varsity football coach at a high school in Gaithersburg, Md.

Foringer's athletes do a light warm-up, then spend 15 to 20 minutes stretching before each practice. "The more flexible the athlete is, the less susceptible to injury he becomes," Foringer said. "It's kind of common sense. If you take something that's taut and tough and you yank it, you're going to tear it."

Warm-up more valuable

But that's not what studies show. "Stretching was not significantly associated with a reduction in total injuries," according to the CDC study, "and similar findings were seen in the subgroup analyses."

In static stretching, "you're taking the muscle to the point where it naturally wants to go, and then you're taking it a little bit farther," said Meller. That produces microscopic tears of muscle fibers and does nothing to prevent injury, he said. It also may weaken the muscle slightly, increase the possibility of injury and inhibit performance, according to him and the CDC study.

For those who want to stretch, it should be done after a warm-up or at the end of an exercise routine because warm muscles are more pliable.

Research indicates that warming up before exercise is more valuable than stretching. Specifically, Meller said, you should spend three to five minutes gently putting your body through the actions you're about to perform, slowly increasing the intensity. If you're going to play tennis, he said, swing forehands, backhands and serves, and run forward, backward and laterally before you hit the first ball.

The CDC reports that a warm-up that raises your heart rate and body temperature gets your blood flowing, nerves firing and metabolism increasing to improve performance and prevent injury.