

## Flexibility = Mobility

*“What is flexibility?”* Flexibility is the ability of a joint to work through its full range-of-motion, and it is vital to health and fitness. Flexibility increases in response to regular stretching efforts, and it decreases with inactivity. Therefore, an inactive individual is likely to experience problems with flexibility which may in turn hamper even the simplest of daily activities. Aging also decreases natural elasticity of muscles and joints, but it is never too late to begin with efforts to increase flexibility. Potential benefits to such efforts include:

- Preventing, delaying the onset and/or reducing the associated symptoms of arthritis.
- Reductions in existing joint pain.
- Increases in balance and stability.
- Reduced incidence of muscle cramps.
- Improved posture and alignment.
- Enhanced development of strength.
- Production of the relaxation response.
  - Slowing of breath and heart rate, reduction of mental stress and blood pressure.

*“What do I need to know before I start?”* For best results, efforts to stretch should be daily. A static stretch (one that is held) should be held for a minimum of 20 seconds, and a dynamic stretch (one that is done with movement) should be done in a smooth and fluid fashion.

*“Where do I start?”* Begin by doing a quick assessment in an effort to find a starting point.

- *“Back scratch”* (shoulder flexibility): To access the **R** shoulder, reach over the **L** shoulder with the **L** hand. Reach as far as you can...as if you are trying to reach a spot in the middle of your back that itches and you can't quite reach it. NOW...reach the **R** hand down and under, reaching your **R** fingertips up toward your **L** fingertips. In your mind's eye...estimate the distance between the finger tips. Switch sides, and compare **the flexibility of the L shoulder** to that of the R.
- *“Sit-and-reach”* (back, hips and leg flexibility): Sit up towards the front edge of the chair...extend the **R** leg forward, toes flexed up towards the ceiling. The L hand is placed firmly over the L leg for support. Reach toward the toes of the **R** foot with the fingertips of the **R** hand. The closer the fingers are to the toes (not bending the knee) the better the flexibility in the back, hips and back of the leg. Repeat with the **L** leg.

*“How do I improve my flexibility?”* For the purpose of being time efficient, focus on the 3 major joints; shoulders, chest and hips.

- Back, hip & leg flexibility: “*sit-n-reach*” stretch. The leg is long, the toes are up to the ceiling, the torso is lengthened and the stretch forward is to where it is comfortable.
- Chest flexibility: “*wings of a bird*” stretch. Hands come behind the back; elbows fanned out comparable to the wings of a bird. Open the *wings* and pinch the shoulder blades together feeling the stretch across the chest and in the front of the shoulders. Breathe!
- Shoulder flexibility: “*back stroke*” stretch. This is done in 3 steps for varying levels of capability that exist in-and-between readers.
  - 1) Alternate slowly rolling the shoulders back with the arms hanging by the sides.
  - 2) Alternating elbow circles (only if option 1 is comfortable).
  - 3) Back stroke. Only for those comfortable to do so...alternating, the arms move forward, up and back; emphasizing the back action. NOTE: Understand that forward circles are an option, but we actually do enough forward action every day. Therefore, it is the back action that is needed to increase range-of-motion.

“*What else should I be aware of?*” Be aware that safety is priority, and understand that overstretching--stretching the muscles to the extreme—can actually decrease the stability of a joint. Also remember...always “listen to your body”. Remember that when doing any stretch...the stretch should be *felt*, but it should not create pain and/or discomfort. In addition, know that we often *hold* our breath when we *hold* a stretch. Muscles need oxygen to work so a relaxed and even breathing pattern is a must.

I’m sure you are already trying out some of the stretches! 😊 Understand that the stretches above are only a small sampling. See the FitXpress archives found here on the Re-Creative Resources webpage for the handout entitled *10 Great Stretches for Active Aging*. There are many more great handouts found in our training manual which is part of the new FitXpress *Steps to Better Balance and Fall Prevention* training module. For more information about our module, or with any input, call 1-800-481-7449 or email me; [nikki@fitxpress.com](mailto:nikki@fitxpress.com)

