
Stretching & Your Body's Response

BY DAVID SPRINGER, PT

Stretching is a vital part of any exercise regimen. Targeted stretching for areas of impairment is essential in helping restore a healthy, functioning body. However, we often become complacent with the idea of stretching. Given the array of opinions and recommendations it can be difficult to know where to begin or what is best suited to your body's needs. Research provides us with some encouraging news that will help motivate you to stay the course! You may not be able to grow new cartilage or reverse deterioration of joints and discs, but you can impact muscles surrounding these tissues. Muscles not only help us with functional mobility, but support the alignment and integrity of our skeletal system, optimizing function of joints and discs.

Studies over recent decades have taken a close look at the duration of stretch and subsequent benefit. Essentially seeking to answer the question we hear so often from patients: "How long do I have to do this to get benefit?" Most of the studies determined that stretching more than 30 seconds does not yield any greater benefit than 60, 90, or 120 second durations - that's good news! One study in particular concluded that between two protocols of stretching, one for 10 second durations, and another for 30 second durations, there was only negligible gain in the 30 second study group.*



Most individuals can hold a firm, efficient stretch for at least 10 seconds. We can make an impact on our muscles this quickly. The reality is that many patients with chronic pain struggle to hold static stretch positions for longer durations, e.g., 30 - 60 seconds. Expectations for patients to do so, personally and in physical therapy, will likely result in patients not stretching at all or performing a stretch for 30 - 60 seconds, but not achieving appropriate intensity to make gains. What matters most in the studies referenced is the cumulative time of stretching, not duration. You can stretch a muscle for 10 seconds for six repetitions (60 - 90 seconds of your day) and research revealed that within three weeks you will have significant gains in that muscle. Stretching will likely be included in any home exercise program your physical therapist establishes at Northwest Spine and Pain Medicine. **Be encouraged in the fact that in 10 - 15 minutes you can perform a comprehensive routine aimed at helping you to be your best functioning self!**

*Daniel Cipriani, *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research*
