

## Massage and Stretching

Stretching is the term used to describe a modality that lengthens shortened soft tissue (muscle and fascia) to increase a joint's range of motion. Stretching is achieved by forcing the elastic connective tissue surrounding a muscle to lengthen. Some benefits of stretching are: increased flexibility, improved muscle symmetry and balance creating better posture, increased agility, decreasing risk of injury. Stretching is vital to a well balanced body because as muscle fibers shorten and become tighter and weaker the resulting stiffness can translate into poor posture, back pain and mobility issues.

With its many varied forms, yoga is a great example of a flexibility program. No matter what form of flexibility program one employs, massage is an excellent method to support and enhance that program's benefits.

Massage intrinsically lengthens a muscle due to the therapist's manual manipulation of the muscle fibers. The muscle fibers are warmed-up because of increased blood flow to the muscle being worked. With the increased blood flow, the muscle becomes more supple and is allowed to be manipulated with more ease. It is at this time that a natural lengthening can take place. Many skilled massage therapists recognize this as an opportune time to take this lengthening to the next level and introduce stretching techniques.

Incorporating stretching techniques into a massage session is very effective for several reasons. During a massage the body's parasympathetic nervous system is engaged resulting in a deepened state of relaxation. The breathing pattern is slower and deeper. The release of cortisol (the hormone that decreases tissue repair and inhibits the immune system) is slowed. Visualization techniques (to enhance the relaxation response and deepen the stretch) are more easily employed. With these factors in place a deeper stretch can be achieved, resulting in greater muscle lengthening.

Many people find that the resulting effects of a massage last longer when the therapists includes some sort of stretching techniques during the massage session. In this massage therapist's opinion, massage and stretching work synergistically to promote an enhanced state of health and well being.

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