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The Weather Outside is Frightful, but Stretching Can Be Delightful

It's the natural cycle of the seasons… it's getting colder. And the colder weather may necessitate a longer warm-up for tighter muscles, joints and tendons, especially if you are running or walking outside. Tight muscles, tendons and joints can lead to injuries and time off exercise and training, which nobody wants. This means a good warm- up and stretch before your run or walk is a great idea.

There always seems to be some level of controversy over whether stretching is beneficial and can lead to fewer injuries. Some athletes don't stretch, and some do. Some like to perform static stretching, some like dynamic stretching, and some do both. Like most things in life, stretching and warming up depend on an athlete's individual needs.

Stretching is most especially good for your muscles and tendons. Colder weather can lead to tightening of the muscles and tendons, but so can a sedentary job that has you sitting or standing in one position for many hours of the day. I compare cold or tight muscles to Silly Putty or bread dough. If you have ever played with Silly Putty or bread dough you'll know that it can be very tight at first and if you pull on it too quickly it may break. However, if you slowly stretch or knead it, it will warm up, stretch and not break. Similarly, if you start exercising at a quick pace, the muscles may overstretch and cause injury or pain.

There are many different types of stretches. The main ones are static, dynamic and ballistic. Static stretching is when you put a stretch on a muscle at or near its furthest range of motion and hold it for 15-20 seconds. Dynamic stretching is when you actively move a limb or joint through a full range of motion. Ballistic stretching is when you actively push or bounce a joint beyond its normal range of motion. I do not recommend ballistic stretching because it can lead to injuries. For the purposes of this article, we will focus on dynamic stretching and its benefits.

As mentioned previously, dynamic stretching is an active movement of a joint through its full range of motion, but not pushing beyond that. Dynamic stretching allows the muscle to loosen and increases the temperature of the muscle, which will decrease the risk of injury. It also targets multiple muscle groups at one time, unlike static stretching, which typically only targets one muscle group. Dynamic stretching should take about five minutes and can be combined with some level of static stretching prior to exercise. Dynamic stretching also is great because you can incorporate it into a walking warm-up prior to a run or more intense walking routine.

Here are a few examples of common dynamic stretches that you can incorporate into your warm-up:

Forward and backward leg swings
Hold onto something for stability and simply swing you leg forward and backward for about 15-20 seconds on each side. This stretch targets your hamstring in the back of your leg and your hip flexors in the front of your leg.

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Side-to-side leg swings
Once again, stabilize your stance and make sure you keep good core and spine stability in a neutral position. Swing one of your legs out to the side and across and in front of the leg you are standing on. This stretch targets your adductors (groin muscles) and abductors (outer gluteal muscles).

Walking lunges
Step forward with your right leg in a lunge. Then push off with your left leg and step forward into a lunge with your left leg. Ensure that you are avoiding extension of your spine and keep your core muscles engaged. Also make sure that your knee does not push forward beyond your toe. This stretch will target your hip flexors, hamstrings and gluteal muscles.

Side lunges
With a wide stance and while keeping both feet planted on the ground, lean to the right while bending your right knee and lunging over your right foot. Then stand up straight. Keep your chest and head up as you are performing this stretch. Focus on one side for about 20 seconds and then switch sides. This stretch will target the gluteal muscles, adductors, hamstrings and hip flexors

Piriformis stretches
This stretch is also performed while walking. Step and stand on your right leg, then grab your left ankle, bend your left knee and bring it up in front of your right thigh. Alternate between legs five times. This stretch will target your gluteal muscles, piriformis muscle and iliotibial band.

Hamstring sweeps
Step forward with your right leg, heel on the ground and toes facing upward. Keep your right leg straight, and your left leg slightly bent. Flex forward at the spine in a motion that would mimic sitting in a chair. As you do this, sweep each arm along the ground at your sides, forward then back toward your body. Do this 5-10 times on each leg. This is a great stretch to target the hamstrings.

There are many other dynamic stretches, but these provide a great starting point and will target the most injured and tightest muscles in runners and walkers, especially as colder weather kicks in. Once again, this should only take about five minutes. For additional benefits you can incorporate these same stretches into your cool-down phase. You should feel the stretch with any of these exercises, but you should not have a significant amount of pain associated with any of these stretches.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding an injury or pain, please reach out to one of our experienced sports medicine physicians at Corewell Health Medical Group Orthopedics at (616)267- 8860. You can also find more information about our orthopedic program and providers on our website.