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The Most Neglected Fitness Factor

Interestingly, most people have not actually learned what physical fitness really means, what it entails and what components play an essential part of it.

Being physically fit means more than just walking or riding your bike regularly. It means more than going to the gym twice a week and lifting weights. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), physical fitness means:

“The ability to carry out daily tasks with vigor and alertness, without undue fatigue, and with ample energy to enjoy leisure-time pursuits and respond to emergencies. Physical fitness includes a number of components consisting of cardiorespiratory endurance (aerobic power), skeletal muscle endurance, skeletal muscle strength, skeletal muscle power, flexibility, balance, speed of movement, reaction time, and body composition.”

It appears that **flexibility** tends to be especially neglected among all the fitness factors. According to the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM), flexibility refers to “the ability to move a joint through its complete range of motion.”² Flexibility is a highly adaptable fitness component and you can benefit from it at any point in your life, even if you get a late start with it. **Flexible joints are vital for the maintenance of pain-free and independent movement.**

The three key components that affect your flexibility:

- 1) joint structure,
- 2) muscle elasticity and length, and
- 3) your nervous system

You have no control over your joint structure, as heredity plays a part in that; however, you can have impact on the other two components through flexibility training. To reap the benefits of flexibility fitness, it is important to work on all major joints, not just one particular area on your body.

The type of flexibility training that is important and necessary to become “flexibly fit” for the average person

(athletes have additional types of flexibility training that is important) is **static flexibility**. It increases one’s overall flexibility for regular daily activities and it helps to maximize movement during all other physical activity (structured or unstructured). Static flexibility training simply requires you to hold a stretch without movement or bouncing.

Flexibility training should only be performed when your muscles are warmed up; thus, it is recommended that flexibility training be done at the end of your regular workout or after a short cardiovascular workout of ten minutes (e.g. walking or biking). The recommendations for flexibility fitness are:

Frequency: Three to seven days per week (seven is ideal!)

Intensity: Stretch to the point of mild discomfort, not pain

Time: Hold stretches for 20–30 seconds and perform them two to four times for the same area

Type: Static stretching exercises that focus on all major joints (from head to toe)

Improving your flexibility through stretching could greatly improve your daily movement, including turning, bending down, and lifting. You could do any movement with greater ease, less discomfort or even pain. No matter what age, ability level or current fitness status, you can benefit from incorporating some basic flexibility fitness into your daily life. ■



▲ Dominique Gummelt

References

1. <https://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/basics/glossary/index.htm>. Accessed June 19, 2018.
2. Franklin, B.A. (editor). *ACSM's Guidelines for Exercise Testing and Prescription, 6th Edition*. Philadelphia. Lippincott Williams & Wilkins. 2000.

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