

STRETCHING

What happens when you run?

As you run your muscles are repeatedly contracting and relaxing, and you hit the ground with around 2.5x your body weight on each step. This is all well and good until any sort of problem occurs and your body can't keep up with this any longer.

This can increase your risk of injury as your body becomes unbalanced, and you start to run in a different way and other muscles start to overcompensate.

Problems with running can arise from spending lots of time sitting down, which can lead to postural problems that can cause problems with running. In addition, running on cold muscles can also cause problems, making dynamic warm ups so important.

How can stretching help with this?

With specific, targeted stretching you can help to elongate any tight muscles, iron out any imbalances and generally improve your range of motion and flexibility. This will allow you to have a more balanced and fluid running style (rather than the slightly lop-sided and tense style that lots of people have...).

The body is interconnected and so a problem in one place may go unnoticed but be causing problems elsewhere in the body. You can imagine this like a bed sheet – if you tug on one corner, the whole thing will move even though you have only done something to one small part. The body is like this, any change in one area will have a chain reaction throughout. A physiotherapist should be able to help you to identify these problems and come up with a programme to manage and reduce them.

For this reason, it is also important to try and stretch all body areas. Even the upper body, which might not appear to have a role in running is really important for keeping you upright and stable and so needs to be able to move freely. Stretching your upper body might also inadvertently have a positive impact of reducing problems in your lower body.

Key points to remember

- Never stretch cold muscles – this increases the risk of injury
- Dynamic (moving) stretches are best before running to get blood flowing to your muscles
- Static stretches can be done after a run but should be held for only 6-10 seconds
- Longer stretching sessions, which will really increase your flexibility and range of motion should be done as a separate session
- Stretching should never be painful – you should be able to feel a gentle stretch but it shouldn't hurt