

Stretching

If you spend a few minutes watching athletes of different sports you will soon realise how differently they carry out stretching. If they stretch at all! A few years ago many people did not stretch at all, but more recently it has become a standard part of a dancer's life.

Many dancers are clear about the stretching they need to do. But some of them don't actually do it, and others would be better if they changed what they were doing!

Much of the stretching being carried out by dancers has been handed down from teacher to student, and it isn't necessarily up to date with the information we know these days.

Why stretch?

There are many reasons to stretch. It might be:

- To increase muscle length permanently. For example, stretch the hamstring muscles so that over time we can kick our leg higher to the front.
- To prevent muscle bulk formation, especially the calf muscles which a dancer wants to be strong and slim, not short and bulky.
- To prevent or alleviate delayed-onset muscle soreness. This is when you ache the day after doing a new exercise, or after doing more than you are used to.
- To disperse lactic acid build-up. This can build up if you have worked a muscle really hard.
- To reduce tension in the muscle. Sometimes a muscle can hurt if we have held an awkward position for a while, or if we are very stressed.
- To increase elasticity temporarily. This is to make our muscles stretchier in the exercise that follows immediately after the stretching.
- To reduce the risk of muscle injury. If a muscle is stretchier then it is less likely to be overstretched when we exercise.
- As part of a rehabilitation programme. Sometimes we are given stretching exercises to help a muscle heal after an injury. You really need to know why you are stretching to make sure you are doing the right type of stretching to achieve your goal.

Which muscles should we stretch?

This is a very individual matter. Many people stretch the muscles that are already very flexible, because it looks good to the people around them. But they should really be spending time stretching their least flexible muscles, and those in which they've had an injury in the past.

Also, be specific to your activity. Choose the muscles that need to be stretchy to allow you to do what you do safely. For example, you might need to stretch different muscles before a tap class than before a ballet class. Or it might be the muscles that you have just worked hard in class that you need to pay some attention to afterwards.

Think about what your activity requires and what your body needs.

Types of stretching

- Ballistic/Dynamic - This is stretching that involves bouncing at the end of a joint's range of movement, usually using body weight. A typical example is the dancer, with one foot resting on the barre, bouncing into box splits. This method is effective at increasing muscle length, but carries a risk of causing damage to muscle by overstretching.
- Static - This is where the dancer moves a joint to a position where they can feel tension in the muscle being stretched, and holds that position still for an extended period. Studies have shown this to work just as well as ballistic techniques, but it doesn't carry the same risk of injury.
- Proprioceptive neuromuscular facilitation - Some people call this contract/relax. The dancer resists a partner pushing their limb, then they relax and the partner moves their limb further into range. This requires good communication between the dancer and partner because only one of them can feel if and when it hurts. Many professionals feel that children and teenagers who are still growing should not use this.

Should it hurt?

No. Pain when stretching means muscle fibres are being torn. These will heal with a scar tissue, which is inelastic. It will never act like normal muscle tissue, and is at greater risk of problems in the future. The saying "No pain, no gain" is just not true, and is dangerous.

When should you stretch?

Always warm-up adequately. This means that muscles are at their most flexible and least likely to get injured.

Never compete when stretching. Concentrate on what you need to achieve, not how fabulous or pitiful the person next to you looks!

Remember that stretching is an important part of cool-down and of injury prevention.