

Can stretching replace other types of exercise? Fitness experts explain positives and negatives of the latest trend

April 12 2024, by Ian Thomsen



Stretching is one part of a healthy approach to fitness, says Maureen Watkins, shown here working with Northeastern student Abigail Honson. Credit: Alyssa Stone/Northeastern University

There is massage. There is yoga. There is physical therapy.

Now, there are stretching sessions.

Stretching isn't new, of course. But the recent focus on extensive one-on-one sessions with stretching specialists has inspired a new layer of businesses within the fitness industry.

Hundreds of shops dedicated to stretching have opened throughout the U.S.—including the StretchMed franchises started by Northeastern graduate Brian Cook.

The stretching sessions have been growing for years, fueled in part by TikTok and other [social media platforms](#). Health clubs have created stretching areas as participation in stretching classes almost doubled in 2023.

"Stretching helps to elongate our [connective tissue](#)," says Maureen Watkins, a Northeastern University associate clinical professor of [physical therapy](#), [human movement](#) and rehabilitation sciences. "It decreases stiffness in both our muscles and our tendons, which means you're going to improve your range of motion when you stretch."

How beneficial is stretching alone?

Is the focus on stretching—and only stretching—enough to help people develop fitness? "Stretching is important," says David Nolan, an associate clinical professor at Northeastern's Department of Physical Therapy, Movement and Rehabilitation Sciences and director of the Mass General Hospital/Northeastern University Sports Physical Therapy Residency. "But I don't necessarily think that it's the end-all and be-all."

Stretching is one necessary aspect of a healthy regimen, the Northeastern

experts say.

"Typically, more than one intervention or exercise type is needed to be well," adds Watkins. "Yes, stretching is important for all of us to stay healthy and to maintain our range of motion. But it's not going to fix all our problems. Just like in life, we need a balance of mobility and stability."

Why has stretching become popular?

The focus on stretching has boomed as working hours have become more sedentary. And there's the unavoidable truth that bodies grow stiffer with age.

"These companies that are focused on stretching have identified a need," says Nolan, a clinical specialist at Mass General Sports Physical Therapy who oversees physical therapy care operations for the Boston Marathon. "When I talk to athletes and other patients about their typical routine, often I'm hearing them say, 'I know I should stretch more.'"

For people who haven't worked out for a while, Nolan says that beginning an exercise regimen with a focus on stretching isn't necessarily a bad idea.

"If you're doing nothing, and that's where you're starting?" Nolan says of stretching. "Then that's awesome. As a physical therapist I would celebrate that."

But he and Watkins insist that stretching alone won't get the job done.

Quarterback Tom Brady was able to extend his NFL career to age 45 because of his devotion to muscle and joint "pliability." But there was so much more to his regimen, says Watkins.

"His focus was to address muscle pliability through stretching, applying pressure through foam rolling and strengthening," Watkins says. "It's not just one-stop shopping. Stretching is not going to fix everything.

"Stretching is going to help—along with soft-tissue massage and a combination of other interventions."

What else is necessary besides stretching?

Strength and cardiovascular training are also necessary, Nolan says.

For those who are seeking to stretch on their own, Watkins recommends holding a stretch for 20 to 30 seconds. Then perform each stretch two to three times. And aim for three to four sessions per week.

"It does take a while for your muscles to get elongated and gain new motion," Watkins says. "Many people are tight—and it took a while for them to get tight. So it's going to take a little while to get more flexible. If motion is limited, the key is consistency and stretching multiple times a week to address those affected muscle groups."

If you feel pain during a stretch, Watkins says that's the signal to back off. If you're suffering from an injury, she recommends seeking a physical therapist to help guide you through recovery.

"And then the trick is to use your body," Watkins says. "You have this beautiful new range of motion and we want to maintain it. After you stretch make sure that you're doing some type of active movement and strengthening to maintain that motion."

Focus on strengthening your muscles

If you're already limber, adds Watkins, it may be a sign that you should be focused on strengthening your muscles more so than elongating them.

For most people, stretching should be embraced as a natural instinct.

"If you ever see animals when they first get up in the morning, what do they do? They stretch," Watkins says. "They instinctively put their bodies through that motion. And so I always try to start my day off with a nice big stretch before I get out of bed. The animals do it without even thinking about it because they know it's important."

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Provided by Northeastern University

Citation: Can stretching replace other types of exercise? Fitness experts explain positives and negatives of the latest trend (2024, April 12) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-04-experts-positives-negatives-latest-trend.html>

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