

Flexibility programs in the workplace are steadily gaining popularity. Organizations that implement a stretching regimen into their daily work practices can see reductions in work injuries and their related costs, improvement in worker morale and a reduction in disability costs.

Increased flexibility can help many employees avoid injury and pain. Stretching counters the shortening of muscles that occurs during repetitive daily tasks or exercises. Stretching also provides blood and nutrients to working muscles and tissues throughout the workday to prevent fatigue, discomfort and musculoskeletal disorders. Additionally, it stimulates fluid formation in joints, reducing stiffness and pain that might otherwise develop. As we age, we experience gradual losses of flexibility; however, it's never too late to start a stretching program to improve it.

Benefits of Stretching

Flexibility reduces risk of injury by:

- Releasing muscle tension and soreness
- Decreasing joint pain and stress
- Reducing risk of injury
- Preparing the muscles for more vigorous activities
- Increasing the range of motion in joints
- Improving balance, stability, posture and circulation

Using a Workplace Flexibility Program

A five-minute prework stretching program is an easy way to introduce this wellness benefit to your employees. A respected supervisor should lead the group during the stretching time allotted. By providing the time for employees to stretch, you will increase the rate of participation.

A flexibility program in the workplace might also include periodic stretching during a shift. Awkward postures cause stress and tension in the muscles, so workers should focus on stretching the neck, shoulders, mid and lower back, hips, elbows, forearms and wrists.



For examples of stretches, take a look at EMC's *Stretching in the Workplace* booklet. It contains photos and instructions for a variety of full-body stretches. The booklet is available on EMC's website in the Loss Control section, or you can contact your local EMC loss control representative.

Stretching Technique

- Warm up muscles before stretching by doing at least five minutes of low intensity activity such as walking or marching in place.
- Ease into each stretch. Movements should not be quick or sudden.
- Take a deep breath and slowly exhale as you gently stretch a muscle to the point of tension.

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- Hold each stretch for 30 seconds. You should feel a pull in the area you are stretching, but you should not feel sharp pain.
- Relax and repeat the stretch two to four more times.
- Stretch both sides. Use the same stretches for the same amount of time on both sides of your body.
- Stretch at least two to three days per week.

When stretching, avoid:

- Bouncing as you stretch; this can cause injury.
- Stretching a muscle that is not warmed up.
- Straining or pushing a muscle too far. If you feel pain, ease up on the stretch.
- Holding your breath during the stretch.
- Stretching an injured muscle or joint.

For Additional Information

American Council on Exercise:

www.acefitness.org

Mayo Clinic: www.mayoclinic.com

- Fitness

Wellness Council of America: www.welcoa.org

- Benefits of Stretching in the Workplace

EMC Insurance Companies: www.emcins.com

- Tech Sheets—Musculoskeletal Disorders & Symptoms, Ergonomic Risk Factors, Wellness Programs in the Workplace
- Ergonomics Resources—*Stretching in the Workplace* booklet, *Office Stretching* booklet