



## **Stretching Can Help Increase Your Fireground Performance**

For most firefighters, stretching takes a back seat to the mandatory and/or voluntary exercise routines conducted in firehouses across the country. Many in our profession believe a quick stretch of the hamstrings and calves is something to be done only if they have a few extra minutes before pounding out some miles on the treadmill. The main concern is exercising, not stretching, right?

Not really hard-charger... Although studies about the benefits of stretching are mixed, stretching may help to improve your flexibility, which in turn may improve your performance on the fireground and decrease your risk of injury. The trick is to understand why stretching can help — and then how to stretch **CORRECTLY!**

### **Why you should consider stretching regularly**

Studies about the benefits of stretching have had mixed results. Some show that stretching helps, while others show that stretching has little if any benefit. The main benefits of stretching are thought to be:

- It can help improving athletic performance which equals improved performance on the fireground. *We are athletes in our own unique way ladies and gentlemen...embrace that concept!*
- It can help to decrease the risk of on-the-job injuries. Stretching can help improve flexibility and decrease your risk of injuries by helping your joints move through their full range of motion.
- It increases blood flow to the muscle.

### **Do it right the first time**

Before you plunge headfirst into a stretching routine, make sure you do it safely and effectively. While you can stretch anytime, anywhere — in your home, at work, in a hotel room or at the park — you want to be sure to use proper technique. Stretching incorrectly can actually do more harm than good.



Check out OSFM's Pocket Tools for videos demonstrating proper stretching techniques.

[http://www.ncdoi.com/OSFM/RPD/PT/HW\\_Functional\\_Fitness.aspx](http://www.ncdoi.com/OSFM/RPD/PT/HW_Functional_Fitness.aspx)

### **Stretch smarter not harder:**

As with any exercise related routine, you need to approach stretching with caution. If you have a chronic condition or an injury, you may need to adjust your stretching techniques. For example, if you already have a strained muscle, stretching it may cause further harm. The adage "Smarter not harder" is not always prevalent in the fire service but strive to keep it in mind when stretching.

Consider the following tips:

- **Don't consider stretching your "warm-up":** This may sound strange but you can actually hurt yourself if you stretch cold muscles. Before stretching, warm up with light walking, jogging or biking at low intensity for five to ten minutes. Better yet, stretch after your exercise routine when your muscles are already warmed up.
- **Focus on major muscle groups:** When you're stretching, focus on your calves, thighs, hips, lower back, neck and shoulders. Also stretch muscles and joints that you routinely use at work or play and make sure that you stretch both sides. *For example, if you stretch your left hamstring, be sure to stretch your right hamstring, too.*
- **Don't bounce:** Bouncing as you stretch can cause small tears in the muscle. These tears leave scar tissue as the muscle heals, which tightens the muscle even further, making you less flexible and more prone to pain.
- **Don't aim for pain:** Expect to feel tension while you're stretching, not pain. If it hurts, you've pushed too far. Back off to the point where you don't feel any pain, then hold the stretch.
- **Make your stretches function-specific:** Some evidence suggests that it's helpful to do stretches tailored for your sport or activity. Think about the muscles you primarily use during fire suppression and overhaul operations...



# Health and Wellness

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### FITNESS TIPS

- **Keep up with your stretching:** Stretching can be time-consuming but you achieve the best results/benefits by doing it regularly. If you don't stretch regularly, you risk losing any benefits the stretching offered. *For instance, if stretching helped you increase your range of motion, and you stop stretching, your range of motion may decrease again.* It's sort of like ropes and knots...if you don't use it, you lose it.

So there it is... stretching can benefit your performance on the fireground but don't think for a minute because you stretch, you can't or won't get injured. Stretching, for instance, will not prevent an overuse injury. Talk to your agency's health and wellness representative/PFT, family doctor or physical therapist about the best way to stretch if you have any health concerns.

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