

When it comes to stretching, can you teach an old dog new tricks?

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Often, people don't start something because they fear it's too late. Or maybe this is just a convenient excuse. On the subject of stretching, whether it's a genuine belief or an easy excuse, the "I'm too old" one won't cut it! Here's why...

What happens when you stretch?

Becoming more flexible results from two adaptations to the practice of stretching. The first consists of rewiring the brain. Given what we now understand about the brain - that it is indeed very "plastic" i.e it can form new pathways at almost any age, we can work on this quite easily. We simply stretch gently, holding a mildly uncomfortable position for a period of time. The brain learns that this position is not threatening and with repeated exposure to this position, new pathways form. These new positions become "normal." Moving to these new positions becomes easier and pain-free.

When you stretch, so long as you do it correctly and hold it for long enough, your body also grows more tissue. Your muscles and their surrounding fascia actually become a little longer. (See Geek Alert below) Just as you gain muscle when you fatigue them by lifting weight, or put on weight when you eat too much, your muscles grow a bit longer when you stretch them. It's a predictable and uncontroversial biological adaptation. In fact, try overeating for a few weeks and NOT putting on any weight. I bet you can't! Similarly, try stretching correctly and NOT becoming more flexible. I bet you can't do that either!

The moral of the story is? IF YOU CAN STILL GROW WIDER, YOU CAN ALSO GROW A LITTLE LONGER!

Geek Alert!

For those interested in how muscles grow longer, below is a good reference

Essentially, there is a preferred length for sarcomeres, which is generally around 2.5 micrometers. (A sarcomere is the basic contractile unit of muscle fiber.) If the sarcomere is continuously stretched beyond that length, the body will react by building another sarcomere added in series to the existing ones, thus the muscle fiber becomes longer: *Jorgenson KW, Phillips SM, Hornberger TA. Identifying the Structural Adaptations that Drive the Mechanical Load-Induced Growth of Skeletal Muscle: A Scoping Review. Cells. 2020 Jul 9;9(7):1658. doi: 10.3390/cells9071658. PMID: 32660165; PMCID: PMC7408414.*

