

Does Stretching Alone Help to Prevent Injuries?

I hold to the theory that we need to be able to move well in order to function well. I like to see people that are able to move one part of their body independent to everything else. We see people run into problems when, for instance, they cannot rotate their hips without their whole spine following suit. Sometimes this is a motor control issue (their brains simply haven't worked out how to activate the program that dissociates the movements) but sometimes this is because the muscles have insufficient length to be able to allow independent joint movement.

I think there is a danger, however, of people just stretching without strengthening. In my view, a long but weak muscle is one that is unable to perform well and also more susceptible to injury. This is why studies have shown that simply stretching following hamstring injuries does not reduce recurrence rates, whereas specific strengthening work can. Once we have gained some extra 'length' in the muscles, we need to make sure that we can control that length and extra joint range of motion. I put the word 'length' in inverted commas because there is some disagreement in the literature about what stretching actually does. Some believe that stretching stimulates extra sarcomeres (muscle cells) to be laid down in series, giving the muscle extra length, whereas others dispute this, saying that stretching reduces the 'tone' of the muscle, meaning that it is for all intents and purposes, more 'relaxed'. Whichever way, I really believe that having joint and muscle flexibility is an important aspect of athleticism, so long as appropriate motor control is evident and muscle strength is maintained throughout the entire range of the muscle.

"A long but weak muscle is one that is unable to perform well and also more susceptible to injury"

The research also seems to suggest that dynamic but controlled stretching is best before training and that static stretching may in fact increase the rate of muscle injury if it is performed prior to ballistic athletic activity. Dynamic stretching is defined as ..and oppositely, static stretching is

Any static stretching I do, therefore, is performed after training or during a dedicated flexibility session.