

Stretching to Improve ROM and Speed Recovery: Fact or Fiction?

By: Charlie Cates, CSCS

<http://selfmadefitness.com/>
charlie@selfmadefitness.com

I have always been a huge proponent of static stretching. Years ago, I would stretch before, after, and between training sessions. Then, as my “knowledge” grew, I limited my static stretches to post-workout. While I never really saw marked increases in joint range of motion (ROM), I did believe that it was helping me recover faster and allowing me to train harder in subsequent sessions. I also believed that it was helping to reduce my rate of injury. Now, however, I question everything that I used to believe about static stretching. Studies clearly show that statically stretching pre-workout diminishes strength and power output during a session, but what about the ability to increase joint range of motion and improve recovery time between training sessions?

Since the turn of the year I have been studying Muscle Activation Techniques (MAT), developed by Greg Roskopf. These teachings have had a great influence on where my opinion of static stretching now stands. First of all, let me say that static stretching is not inherently bad. The problem arises, however, when an improper amount of a stimulus is applied, whether it is static stretching, exercising, eating, etc. Any stimulus that is applied to the body in excess of what the body can handle at that point in time can have a detrimental affect. That being said, I do have a beef with static stretching.

The cornerstone of the MAT philosophy is that inhibition in range of motion is not caused by muscle tightness on one side of the joint, but rather by muscle weakness on the opposite side of the joint. Think about what happens when you walk on ice—you tighten up to *protect* yourself from falling. Therefore, tightness is a protective mechanism that allows your body to stay within a ROM in which you have stability and strength. If you go outside of the ROM that you are actively allowed, you are risking entering ranges where you do not have the ability to control the muscles properly. This is exactly what happens when people force ranges on themselves while statically stretching—they go past the point where they can actively get to in attempt to “loosen up the tightness”. But if the tightness is there as a protective mechanism, is it really a bad thing?

Okay, so I can definitely buy that I’m not increasing my ROM in a healthy way by statically stretching, but what about speeding up recovery by statically stretching after a training session? I used to statically stretch multiple times a day after my multiple training sessions, convinced that I would be unable to train to the best of my ability during the following days if I did otherwise. Yet, almost every morning I would wake up stiff and sore and think, “Man, I would be so much worse off if I didn’t stretch yesterday.” In fact, one of my college teammates asked me one day why he’d be so sore the morning after he would stretch. At the time, I didn’t have an answer for him, chalking it up to a possible altered perceived soreness, but now I have a more logical explanation.

Soreness is created during exercise by eccentric muscle actions, which put little tears in the muscle fibers. I used to think static stretching would help me flush

lactic acid out of my system better, and perhaps it does, but regardless of if I were to stretch or not, the lactic acid would be out of my muscles within a couple of hours anyways. Therefore, the only logical explanation as to why we are sore the day or two after a training session is due to the tiny tears created by eccentric muscle actions. So, logically speaking, how does it make sense that forcing a muscle into a greater eccentric muscle action than what it can actively achieve for a greater time than it would normally achieve it *relieve* soreness? In fact, isn't it more likely that this type of static stretching could very easily be *creating* soreness? Not only that, but couldn't it also very well be likely that you are forcing yourself into a range of motion where you are now unstable and prone to injury?

If static stretching isn't the way to go after a training session, then what is? I would highly suggest meeting with a MAT specialist, if at all possible. These sessions are expensive, so you don't necessarily need to go after every training session, but if you went once every six months, much like a dentist's appointment, to make sure all of the muscle are firing properly, that would be a huge improvement. The body is a remarkable machine, and when it is allowed to work the way it was designed to work you will be able to recover from your training much faster than you ever could before. Your body will be able to heal faster because all of the muscles will be firing properly and doing their intended jobs with minimal compensation.

Obviously I am a huge fan of MAT, but if static stretching is working for you as far as making you feel better after a workout and increasing range of motion, then good for you. However, the questions at large remain, "What exactly are you doing when you statically stretch?" and, "Are you creating abhorrent muscle function and instability with this new range of motion?". Consider that the next time you force your body to go somewhere that it couldn't go on it's own.

Get big or die tryin'.

Charlie Cates
Self Made®, Owner

Charlie Cates is a strength and conditioning specialist and the owner of Self Made® (<http://selfmadefitness.com/>) in Chicago, IL. He has worked with competitive and everyday athletes of all ages and ability levels, from 9-year-old kids to NFL MVP's. He can be reached via e-mail at charlie@selfmadefitness.com.

This article may be reproduced with biographical information intact.