

Stretching for Paddling Longevity

By Nancy Botting

Most of us have heard that stretching is good for you and that it reduces stiffness and helps to prevent injury. If you are new to a paddle sport (kayak/canoe/Stand up/ Dragon boat, etc.) or an old veteran to the joys of being on the water, you may simply need a reminder as to why it is important to stretch to help you to feel more comfortable in your boat, develop more ease getting in and out of your boat and allow you to paddle for many years to come. Regular stretching may be your key to staying injury free.

Fascia is a layer of connective tissue that covers our muscles. It acts like shrink-wrap to hold muscles and muscle groups together and it naturally gets tighter over time. That feeling of stiffness that you feel in the morning when you wake up – that has a lot to do with the shrinking of the fascia overnight while you are sleeping, while sitting at your desk or in your car or even in your kayak or canoe. Your fascia will ‘shrink’ a little bit more every night and begin to bind your muscles into the position that they are used in most. If you wake up in the morning and do the same thing over again your fascia continues to bind and get more rigid. Over time this will reduce your overall body range of motion, make you increasingly stiffer and less able to do things like bend over to touch your toes, get in and out of your kayak or even sit up straight at your desk or in your boat. And because it happens so gradually, you may not be even aware that it is happening.

We naturally get stiffer and lose range of motion as we get older, but when we stretch and move our bodies we also stretch and move the fascia which allows us to maintain greater range of motion, flexibility and suppleness as we age. Although we can't completely

reverse the natural tightening of our muscles as we age, it is possible to increase flexibility at any age by stretching on a consistent basis. It can be as simple as doing a few stretches right after you get out of bed in the morning or after a long paddle in your boat - or as involved as a regular yoga practice. Of course, the more dedicated you are to your stretching the more benefits you'll receive. The important thing is to stretch and move your body in ways that lengthen the muscles that you overuse and strengthen the muscles that you under-use.

Our muscles are connected to our bones by tendons so when we have certain muscle groups that are stronger than others they can pull our bones out of alignment causing pain and injury. Many people develop muscular imbalances in their bodies that predispose them to soft tissue injury such as chronic back or

neck pain or shoulder pains that seem to start for no apparent reason. Often this is caused by muscles on one side of the body becoming much stronger and tighter than the muscles on the other side and the result is a pulling of the spine to one side, a factor that can lead to serious muscle overuse injury. Learning to identify those muscles that have become tight and working on strengthening those muscles that have weakened is the key to maintaining optimal body alignment.

Instead of waiting for an injury to make you stretch... why not start stretching now to stay pain-free and healthy! For most paddle sport athletes, the most important muscle groups to stretch are the hip flexors and the shoulders. Essentially, you need to work on opening the front of the body (chest, shoulders and hips) to counteract the position of sitting in your boat and bending forward while paddling.

It's important to stretch on a regular basis over time. If you want to develop a more structured stretching routine, find a good yoga class near you. It's important to try out different classes to find the one that is right for you. There are many different kinds of yoga and the first class you go to may not be the one for you. Yoga is a fantastic activity that keeps you aligned to stay pain free on the water.

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Try the following stretches to open up your shoulders and hips

Low Lunge

1. From standing - take a wide stance. Bend your front knee over your ankle.
2. Keep your back heel up. You can either do a high lunge which means keeping your back knee off the ground, or a low lunge placing your back knee on the ground.
3. Keep our hands on the ground in low lunge, on your knee or you can lift your arms up over your head, lift the chest and stretch through your fingertips.
4. Hold for 30-60 seconds. Breathe deeply while you stretch. Switch to the other side.

Posterior Shoulder Stretch

Raise one arm and move it diagonally across your chest. With the opposite hand, apply slight pressure on the arm near the elbow. Press smoothly and evenly without bouncing the arm. Hold the pressure for about 30 seconds and release. Repeat the stretching exercise on the other arm.

Chest Stretch

Put both hands behind your back and clasp them together. Raise your hands toward your head as high as you can without causing pain in your shoulders. Hold the stretch for 30-60 seconds, and be careful not to bounce. Let your hands drop back to the resting position and repeat the stretch two or three times.