

## Stretching Out the Kinks

Sports injuries are frequently related to the stretching participants conduct before and after the activity. Stretching not only reduces soft tissue injuries, it also improves flexibility. Increased flexibility can reduce trips and falls while running that can cause fractured bones and other injuries.

The National Center for Sports Safety ([www.sportssafety.org](http://www.sportssafety.org)) recommends a warm-up period of 10 to 15 minutes, focusing on upper and lower muscle groups. Three stretches per muscle group are recommended. Many youth will often bounce while stretching, an unsafe practice that can cause muscle injury. The benefits of a warm-up include preparing the body for physical activity, preparing the heart for physical exercise, rehearsal of sport-specific movement and skills, and mental preparation for the event.

A cool-down period of 5 to 10 minutes following a sport will help the body return to a resting place and assist flushing out waste products that accumulated in the muscles during exercise.

There are a number of excellent resources and links available from the U.S. Department of Health web site ([www.os.dhhs.gov](http://www.os.dhhs.gov)). There are also a number of online sports coach training courses that are excellent training tools for your coaching staff. The American Red Cross also offers a Sports Safety Training course.

Stretching before and after sports activities teaches youth a good life skill, and may help reduce not only their injuries, but those of your staff. An investment of 15 to 20 minutes of stretching can save you time, money and resources, and help keep your athletes in the game.

Everyone wins.