# Cool Down Stretching Exercises

## Learn how to Cool Down properly to recover faster and avoid injury.

Many people dismiss the cool down as a waste of time, or simply unimportant. In reality the cool down is just as important as the warm up, and if you want to stay injury free, it's vital.

Although the warm up and cool down are just as important as each other, they are important for different reasons. While the main purpose of warming up is to prepare the body and mind for strenuous activity, cooling down plays a very different role.

**Why Cool Down?**

The main aim of the cool down is to promote recovery and return the body to a pre exercise, or pre work out level. During a strenuous work out your body goes through a number of stressful processes. Muscle fibres, tendons and ligaments get damaged, and waste products build up within your body.

The cool down, performed properly, will assist your body in its repair process. One area the cool down will help with, is "post exercise muscle soreness." This is the soreness that is usually experienced the day after a tough work out. Most people experience this after having a lay-off from exercise, or at the beginning of their sports season. I remember running a half marathon with very little preparation, and finding it difficult to walk down steps the next day because my quadriceps were so sore. That discomfort is "post exercise muscle soreness."

This soreness is caused by a number of things. Firstly, during exercise, tiny tears called micro tears develop within the muscle fibres. These micro tears cause swelling of the muscle tissues which in turn puts pressure on the nerve endings and results in pain.

Secondly, when exercising, your heart is pumping large amount of blood to the working muscles. This blood is carrying both oxygen and nutrients that the working muscles need. When the blood reaches the muscles the oxygen and nutrients are used up. Then the force of the contracting (exercising) muscles pushes the blood back to the heart where it is re-oxygenated.

However, when the exercise stops, so does the force that pushes the blood back to the heart. This blood, as well as waste products like lactic acid, stays in the muscles, which in turn causes swelling and pain. This process is often referred to as "blood pooling."

So, the cool down helps all this by keeping the blood circulating, which in turn helps to prevent blood pooling and also removes waste products from the muscles. This circulating blood also brings with it the oxygen and nutrients needed by the muscles, tendons and ligaments for repair.

**The Key Parts of an Effective Cool Down**

Now we know what the cool down does and why it is so important, lets have a look at the structure of an effective cool down. There are three key elements, or parts, which should be included to ensure an effective and complete cool down. They are;

1. Gentle exercise;
2. Stretching; and
3. Re-fuel.

All three parts are equally important and any one part should not be neglected or thought of as not necessary. All three elements work together to repair and replenish the body after exercise.

**Sample Cool Down Routines**

To follow are two examples of effective cool downs. The first is an example of a cool down used by a professional athlete. The second is typical of someone who simply exercises for general health, fitness and fun.

**Example 1: - For the Professional**

* 10 to 15 minutes of easy exercise. Be sure that the easy exercise resembles the type of exercise that was done during your work out. For example, if your workout involved a lot of running, cool down with easy jogging or walking.
* Include some deep breathing as part of your easy exercise to help oxygenate your system.
* Follow with about 20 to 30 minutes of stretching. Static stretching and PNF stretching is usually best.
* Re-fuel. Both fluid and food are important. Drink plenty of water, plus a good quality sports drink. The best type of food to eat straight after a work out is that which is easily digestible. Fruit is a good example.

**Example 2: - For the Amateur**

* 3 to 5 minutes of easy exercise. Be sure that the easy exercise resembles the type of exercise that was done during your work out. For example, if your workout involved a lot of running, cool down with easy jogging or walking.
* Include some deep breathing as part of your easy exercise to help oxygenate your system.
* Follow with about 5 to 10 minutes of stretching. Static stretching and PNF stretching is usually best.

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