

**BACK TO THE BASICS: REAL FITNESS RESULTS**  
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**Mobility Work – Feel better, improve training, and avoid injury**

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As a trainer, my job is primarily to make people look, feel, and perform better. Part of this involves strength training and simply building muscle, to be sure, but an important aspect that often gets overlooked, is mobility and flexibility work. The truth is – most people who come to me for training are not (yet) physically capable, or prepared to perform many of the basic technical exercises, without soft tissue work, and improved flexibility. This article will discuss the importance of mobility and flexibility work, discuss the technical aspects of this type of training, and outline practical examples of exercises (along with video links).

**WHAT IS “MOBILITY” WORK?**

Mobility literally means “movement”, as in the movement of muscles, through a range of motion, by a joint (E.g. ankle, knee, hip, shoulder). Through cumulative strain on the body’s joints (either by impactful sports, or less impactful activities that involve extended periods of inactivity), our joint health deteriorates. Joints go by the “use it or lose it” principle.

Mobility drills are exercises that re-train proper joint function, by promoting range of motion, and blood flow to the area of activation. This goes a long way to improving muscle contraction, performance, and recovery. Basically, this happens because more blood flow and nutrients can be delivered to an “open” area, than one that’s very tight, and the vascularity of connective tissue is low, and depends on muscle activity. These mobility exercises are targeted at the major joints, which are the ones that tend to cause people most problems (think shoulders, hips, and knees).

Our connective tissues demand just as much attention as our soft tissue (muscle) does, and recognizing the importance of this aspect of training can help not only improve your physical performances, but your general well being, posture, recovery time, and risk of injury. Muscle bellies, themselves, are not usually the areas for injury, or problems; it’s the joints. Knowing that joints take longer to heal than muscles can also help you better understand recovery time, and also help you program your training sessions.

**HOW TO DO PROPER MOBILITY WORK**

In terms of an approach to mobilizing joints and muscles, and improving flexibility, there are multiple ways. Direct mobility work for tight areas will be key to improving joint activity and function, and can dramatically improve muscular capacity and function, also.

First, there's self-myofascial release techniques (SMR) that can be employed, where pressure is applied to tense muscles, either by a foam roller, or lacrosse ball. Although this is more for soft tissue than connective tissue, it significantly improves mobility, and lends a hand to improving joint function, since joints can't operate efficiently with stiff, tight muscles surrounding them. This soft-tissue technique promotes muscle release, and increased nutrient delivery and blood flow, and a muscle with better blood delivery is a muscle with better contractility and growth. These SMR techniques are short lasting and not a permanent "fix", but can be very effective for ridding the body of excess tension, and promoting better movement quality.

Secondly, there's mobility drills, which as mentioned, involve movement patterns that challenge the joints through their full range of motion. Doing things like hip circles, shoulder rotations, neck rotations, back bends, knee bends, calf raises, etc. all help to mobilize the muscles and joints. The trick is to recognize which areas in your body are tightest, and spend time working on them regularly. For most, the best time to do these drills would be for 5-15 minutes before workouts, almost as a warm-up. If you can string a series of exercise together as a routine, usually they get the heart rate up, body core temperature up, and are a better preparatory warm-up than simple treadmill walking, anyway.

A third, and obvious, approach would be simple flexibility exercises that involve stretching muscles through different ranges of motion, and angles; particularly ones that involve multiple cross-sections in the body (I.e. major muscle groups with multiple joint insertions/attachments). For most people, especially those with jobs that involve sitting, the culprit areas are the quadriceps, hip flexors (upper and lower hip flexors), calves, chest, and biceps. I term this "desk syndrome", where people walk around with rounded shoulders, over-stretched upper backs, tight chest and arms, tight hips, and glutes that are asleep.

Flexibility is a physical quality, just like strength, or speed. It is trainable, adapts with repeated exposure, and develops over time. Like strength training, which requires repeated exposure to a stressful stimulus, in order to incur an adaptation (gains), flexibility work must be repeated and built upon, over time. Like a bow and arrow, muscles need elasticity, and the more we have, the more we can stretch and contract them, to produce force.

### **PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER**

Although mobility drills and stretching may not be "sexy" or "fun", they allow us to continue to lift weights, play sports, and move around freely, without pain or discomfort. Let's face it – EVERYONE can benefit from better movement quality, reduced joint tension and stiffness, and more flexibility. It's just not as fun to work on, as lifting heavy weights, or playing sports. This "mobility" work must be maintained, as strength levels increase, so that our muscle mass and maximal force production doesn't dramatically exceed our bodies' physical capabilities to endure

it. In short, many have more strength or muscle than they have stability, flexibility, and joint health, to support it. Over time, it leads to structural injuries.

Focus on exercises that involve dynamic movements that involve full range of motion through a joint, which helps prime the joints and muscles for the stresses of physical training. Basically, think of the exercises you're wanting to perform that day in the gym, and deconstruct them. Target the major joints and muscles involved in THOSE movements, and your performance will improve.

Perform 5-15 minutes of mobility work as your warm-ups for your workouts, and do your static stretching at the end of the training, on warm muscles. Never deeply stretch cold muscles.

For a full video on 8-10 mobility exercises you can do as a routine, check out Joe DeFranco's "AGILE 8" and "LIMBER 11" videos. They're fantastic tools to add into your training, to keep you feeling mobile, fast, and strong.

See them here:

Agile 8 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3B-3Khbht5s>

Limber 11 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FSSDLDbacc>