

WHY STRETCH

We have all heard that stretching is good for us but has anybody ever explained why? Well, here is the answer. It all has to do with a concept called **compensation**. Now, this is not workers compensation but rather **body compensation**. Here is how it works. As we age most of us loose two very important things, *strength and flexibility*. A person can usually still function adequately being weak but if you loose the ability to move because of poor flexibility, our only choice is to have someone do things for us.

The first place that we loose flexibility is in the hip joints. This most frequently happens because of tight *hamstring* muscles. Your hamstrings are at the back of your thigh and tend to control how much your hip sockets can rotate as you bend forward. So, let's look at a common example of how tight hamstrings affect your body compensation.

We will take an average person who does not stretch and ask him to bend over and pick up a pencil from the floor. This person is a *back lifter* so will bend his knees only a little to begin the motion of getting his hand down to the floor and the pencil. Now, with only a slight bend at the knee his hand will not go down very far. In order to get his hand closer to the pencil he must rotate at the hip sockets. Problem is, his hips no longer rotate fully because of his tight hamstrings, so his hand still cannot get all the way down to the pencil. This is where *body compensation* comes in. In order to get his hand all the way down to the pencil some part of his body must compensate for the lack of knee bend and the tight hamstrings. The compensation will always come in the form of a twisting, bending motion of the lower back.

Here is the key question however. Which part of this person's body will tend to wear out, get arthritic and generally dictate what he can and cannot do as he ages? Well, it will not be the hips because they are hardly moving at all. It will always be the area that is compensating, the *lower back*. So, the lack of flexibility of the hips and hamstrings in this case leads eventually to a worn out back. This type of compensation can happen nearly anywhere in the body where there are joints that move. For example, if you are tight between the shoulder blades, your neck will be compensating to make up for that loss of motion and as you age, your neck becomes arthritic.

The only way to protect yourself from this type of wear and tear is to stay flexible by doing a stretching routine on a regular basis. It is never too late to start, so no excuse there. Actually, the first thing that happens when folks go to the nursing home is that they begin to stretch them out in hopes that they can regain some of their lost function. So do not loose this vital part of your health, begin stretching today!