

Have More Fun This Spring, But Hurt Less



by Ann P. Minton, PhD

Spring is here (thank goodness)...and oh what opportunities we have to be outside again after a cold winter. The river walks and bike paths beckon us and our gardens and yards are ready to be spruced up for the growing season. Amidst all of this excitement to get out into the great outdoors, one thing seems to happen every year about this time. In my sense of urgency to get outside, I overdo it. Something on my body ends up hurting—like my aching back or crunching knees. Whether you are in training for an athletic event or planning to renovate some landscaping like me, there are several things you can do to prevent injuries from occurring and enjoy your time outside with less stress on your body. Let's take a few minutes to plan your spring strategy.

Here's a simple plan I will be putting into place this spring: I promise to do yoga stretches before outdoor work and play, and then get therapeutic massage afterward. It's simple and it works. Yoga stretching is a great way to warm up, and you don't even need to be familiar with the names of the poses to do them. Likewise, massage can be a therapeutic reward when reactivating muscles after the inactivity of winter hibernation.

Research shows that the stretches in many yoga poses not only gently warm up the big muscles to do the main work, but also develop the little muscles to support the big muscles. Whether you enjoy running, tennis, cycling or swimming, yoga stretching can help you warm up and get centered before you take off for fun or competition. Yoga helps prevent muscle pain and injuries by maintaining muscle and joint flexibility, and by recruiting intrinsic muscles that support and enhance the spring and summer activities you love.

The best part is you don't have to be a yoga expert to get started. You can take a class at a health club, community center or yoga studio. If you are already familiar with yoga, I recommend that you practice sun salutations (mountain, volcano, forward fold, runner's lunge, plank, crocodile, up dog, down dog) for five to 10 minutes prior to your cardio

warm up. If you are not familiar with yoga, don't worry. The following are a few pointers to get you started.

Stand in good posture and take a deep breath. Then stretch your arms overhead without raising your shoulders toward your ears. Take another deep breath, engage your abdominals and gently reach your hands down toward your toes. It doesn't matter if you can touch them or not, just reach toward them. This practice of stretching up then bending over helps to gently activate all the major muscle groups, and the deep breathing helps to send an extra boost of oxygen to those muscles.

There are many wonderful yoga poses that help you warm up which can be found at www.YogaJournal.com.

Yoga stretching produces warm muscles, which work better and promote healthy tendons, ligaments and joints; and minimize the inevitable aches and pains that accompany increased physical activity. Yoga practice is not only a great way to start your spring activities, but also a great way to start your day any time

of the year.

After you have enjoyed a beautiful day filled with satisfying outdoor activities, therapeutic massage can help you recover from the aftermath of increased activity faster and with less pain. Because most activities use specific muscle groups over and over, those muscles become more injury prone. Overused muscles get tighter, shorter and less supple, and thereby more likely to strain. Even if your outdoor activity is pulling weeds or mowing your yard, you are basically using the same muscles in the same fatiguing movements that produce pain.

Faster recuperation is one of the most important muscular benefits of massage therapy. Research shows that a fatigued muscle recuperates 100% after a five-minute massage, but only 20% after five minutes of rest. So by getting therapeutic massage after your spring activities, you will be ready for more fun in a shorter amount of time. Therapeutic massage reduces muscle soreness because it provides better blood circulation. More nutrients get in and more cellular waste gets out due to increased circulation. This means less muscle pain, less muscle tension and fewer muscle spasms or cramps. It also means you will have better range of motion due to more flexible, supple and resilient muscles.

Don't you feel better already just thinking about getting a massage after a full day of outdoor fun? Whatever outdoor activities you are planning for this spring, try to incorporate yoga and therapeutic massage. You'll be glad you did.

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