

The Best of Both Worlds - Yoga Plus PNF

By [Darryl Olive](#)

When you ask people about the practice of *yoga* in the West, flexibility is one of the first things that comes to mind. Even common objections to why someone can't start a new yoga practice involves flexibility-based comments like, "I'm too tight."

Yoga for sure can increase **flexibility**, but in what ways?

Two of the most important benefits of flexibility are muscle relaxation and the ability to release stress. It may also help with performance in athletic activities and the reduction of delayed onset muscle soreness (DOMS), which occurs 12-48 hours after intense physical activity.

There are multiple ways to achieve the benefits of increased flexibility including, static stretching, dynamic stretching and proprioceptive neuromuscular facilitation (PNF). All types of flexibility training can be applied in yoga.

Static stretching involves a low force, sustained stretch for 15-30 seconds. It uses little or no movement at a low velocity and with maximal control. Classical Hatha yoga is characterized by sustained static stretches held in this manner for three to five breaths. Many researches view the static stretch as the preferred method for flexibility for most people because of the low force, ease and safety.

Unlike static stretching, **dynamic stretching** involves some movement. These are often sport specific and used for athletic performance. They mimic or provide movement rehearsal for the actual movement by taking the body through the range of motion at a slower pace. For example, a hurdler might run with a slow, long stride to emphasize hip opening in preparation for running actual hurdles. Some forms of yoga like Vinyasa and power yoga can involve dynamic flexibility. Many yoga classes begin with sun salutations as a way to dynamically warm the body and neuromuscular system.

PNF stretching involves alternating contractions and relaxation of a muscle group and its opposing muscle group. It was discovered in the late 1940s and is used extensively in the rehab setting and by massage therapists. The underlying theory is that when the opposing muscle group relaxes it provides less resistance to the muscle group being stretched. Or when the muscle being stretched contracts, it ultimately moves to a state of relaxation.

The takeaway with PNF is that we commonly think of flexibility as the muscles, the connective tissue and the joint structures. What is equally important is training the nervous system to relax. We have special sensors or proprioceptors that note changes in muscle length and even protect the body from stretching too far. This action is called the stretch reflex and is initiated by the muscle spindle receptors. This can be felt during a stretch or yoga pose when you experience the

sense of tightness or moderate pain at the maximal edge of a stretch. PNF helps the body reduce the stretch reflex mechanism. Studies show the PNF stretching is able to dramatically increase flexibility in a single session over static stretching (Moore and Hutton, 1980; Prentice, 1983; Sady et al, 1982).

One method of PNF stretching is the hold-relax technique. This involves doing a stretch for a muscle for 10 seconds, actively contracting the muscle isometrically for six seconds, then ending with a passive stretch for 30 seconds where the muscle will relax due to the inhibition of the muscle from the previously contracted state.

This hold-relax technique can be used to move closer to a maximum edge in any yoga pose. For example, in seated forward bend begin with a passive stretch for several breaths. Then press the heels into the floor as if you were going to bend the knee and draw the foot back toward the body to contract the hamstrings. Also lift the chest to contract the back as if you were moving back to a seated or upright staff pose. Hold the tension in the hamstrings and back for six seconds. Release the tension and sink into the stretch further continuing to breathe for 3-5 breaths.

Try this technique the next time you are doing yoga for increased flexibility.

I teach PNF in my yoga classes in Kansas City, Missouri as well as to my instructors in our **200 hour yoga teacher training course** that examines flexibility in great detail.

For more information, visit our yoga teacher training programs at http://www.kcfitnesslink.com/yoga_teacher_training.html. KCFitnessLink is a registered school with the Yoga Alliance offering instructor programs in yoga, yoga therapy, Thai massage therapy, meditation and holistic health.

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