

## **Stretching and Aging**

By Susan Guttzeit, LMT, MAISS

I'm often asked: Why do we get stiffer as we age?

As we get older it becomes even more important to keep moving. Over the years an increasingly sedentary life style can contribute strongly to decreased flexibility and reduced circulation of blood and lymph. However, there are also other factors involved. Stress, postural habits, injuries, muscular imbalances, genetics, and poor nutrition play a role as well.

There is a type of connective tissue throughout the body called fascia that surrounds and protects muscles, bones, nerves, blood and lymphatic vessels as well as organs. It creates a "sliding and gliding environment" that allows muscles to work independently but also to function optimally together. Fascia transports most of the water our body needs and is also a conductor of electrical signals throughout the body. As fascia becomes rigid, the structures it wraps around also become restricted and hypertonic (too tight). Some cells in connective tissue such as collagen become less abundant as we age. Any injuries we've sustained throughout our life-time can leave behind scar tissue that is less pliable than uninjured tissue. Postural habits and muscular imbalances cause fascial changes around muscles, nerves, arteries, veins etc., which restricts our mobility further and reduces our body's ability to flourish. Even tendons and ligaments lose hydration as we age. Drinking more water is important, but to fully hydrate the body, fluids need to be able to reach all areas of the body. If fascia and muscle tissue are tight, they exert undue pressure on vascular and lymphatic systems, restricting flow as well as "pinch" nerves and impair the removal of metabolic waste products produced by cellular activity.

Gentle movements throughout the day can help to keep your body more mobile. If these movements are stretches that are active, repeated, and avoid any stress that triggers a rebound contraction (which causes the muscle to tighten rather than relax) in the muscles you are trying to stretch, the benefits are manifold. The pumping action in the circulatory systems—arterial, venous and lymphatic—flushes the body with restorative blood, oxygen and nutrients as well as removes metabolic waste products. Scar tissue becomes more pliable and tight muscles more supple. With diligence, you can even eliminate old scar tissue.

Active Isolated Stretching (AIS) is a stretching technique that encompasses all of the benefits listed above without any repercussions, if done correctly. Truly, AIS stands out as one of the premiere stretching methods we know of in the world.

Editorial Contribution: Joshua Morton, LMT, MAISS, MMLT.

References: *Balance is Possible: From Head to Toe*, by Joshua Morton, LMT, MAISS, MMLT, Copyright 2009.