



Ant-Ag Stretching



This form of stretching derives its name from using opposing muscle groups (Antagonist and Agonist) to produce a stretch on the opposite side of a joint's range of motion. Cats and dogs do this all the time. For example: to stretch your hamstrings (back of upper thigh) and hip extensors (butt muscles), we use the hip flexors (front of hip) and quadriceps (front of thigh)-the opposing muscle groups to produce a stretch, and vice versa to stretch the quadriceps and hip flexors. It is fairly simple in both theory and practice, with some basic technique involved in being able to isolate contractions in the appropriate muscles, but difficult to explain in words, so don't feel too bad if you are a little confused at first.

Ant-Ag stretching has been three years in its development and has emerged as something that potentially answers a therapeutic dilemma I have had for as many years. **Normal stretching, I came to understand, 'is adding tension to existing tension'**, something that goes against many of the universal principles involved in not only Chinese medicine, but common sense.

There is no doubt that the forms of stretching that we have previously used, sustained static, PNF, contemplative and dynamic, all produce their desired effect at times, but it has been my observation that when there has been muscle or joint pathology of a long-term or chronic nature, that these forms of stretching only produce a short term, temporary benefit for some, leaving them describing themselves as chronically stiff with less an average joint range of motion.

The method and principle of Ant-Ag stretching is so simple that I am sure it could have been previously or currently used by the contemplative cultures that brought us yoga and other healthful ways to move our body, however I have been unable to find anything exactly the same either online or in the public domain.

Benefits

- It is **quick**, taking only around 40 seconds to stretch both groups of opposing muscles with each stretch being held for five seconds only and repeated three times.
- It is **effective**, very quickly approximating the end of current range of motion for both groups of muscles in the above time period.
- It **uses a body's natural mechanism** to stretch the muscle (the antagonist/agonist response causes a muscle to relax if its opposing partner is contracting) thus avoiding the dilemma of adding tension to tension and invoking another natural mechanism, the stretch reflex tonus (which produces a protective contraction in a muscle if it is deemed to be stretching "too much").
- It is **safe**, as it uses the body's natural mechanisms to produce a safe amount of stretch and switch off or reduce other natural or acquired mechanisms that either prevent a relaxed stretch or produce unconscious co-contraction.
- **Breaks down acquired "protection" syndromes** where we "brace or hold" a joint or muscle to protect it from previous or continuing pain or develop patterns of movement which avoid certain ranges of motion, or co-contract and lock up an area to protect it while we perform what was previously a painful movement. These protection syndromes can linger as a residue for years after the original pain has subsided, and in many cases can create bio-mechanical changes that produce their own weaknesses and subsequent injury.

- It **corrects "reciprocal inhibition"** where a muscle that is in a state of unhealthy hyper-tonus or contraction/protection causes a chronic relaxation and subsequent weakness in its opposing (antagonistic) partner. For example, people who hold tension and stress in the top of their shoulders (trapezius muscles) and tend to brace their shoulders, often have weakened lower scapular muscles that would normally hold them down. They have been "inhibited" by the continual contraction in the upper shoulder muscles that not only privilege patterns of use that involve these muscles, but switch off the opposing antagonist muscles to their functional demise.
- **Re-gains strength and control** in weak or biomechanically dysfunctional joints by re-patterning inhibited or weak muscles and dismantling painful memory movements. This allows the return of more normal joint movements using the correct muscles as they were designed.
- **Assists in increasing blood flow** to spasmed or hyper tonic muscles by decreasing pain and allowing the muscles to relax and receive increased arterial flow. Decreased blood flow and subsequent lack of oxygen (ischemia) in muscle injuries and spasm, is responsible for some reasonable percentage of the pain experienced. Muscles or joints that ache at rest or when we sleep, and feel better when we warm up or exercise, are in this category.
- **Develops conscious control** of muscle groups that not only display previous debility or inhibition, but allows participants to be actively involved in their own healing and improvement. Conscious awareness and control of our body is one of the most delightful and useful skills that can be developed. Many people can consciously contract a muscle, but less can consciously fully relax specific muscle groups, especially those with the chronic pathologies mentioned above. Being simply able to contract a muscle and not able to relax it, leaves us in charge of only 50% of a muscles normal functionality of being able to contract and relax. A muscle that does not fully relax or worse, co-contracts, becomes an energy sapping liability to normal joint movement, with the opposing muscle having to pull against its non-relaxed state to produce movement. The loss of the ability to fully relax is clinically common in today's fast paced, so-called "modern" society and is an increasing presentation of one of its unhealthy outcomes. Some people (as you may discover if you have been prescribed Ant-Ag stretching) also have difficulty consciously contracting muscle groups whilst their opposing partners are being stretched. This is more common when there have been unhealthy protective patterns in place for some time.

How to Ant-Ag Stretch (The 'easy way' that I promised at the beginning)

Basically, to stretch a part of your body, you use contraction of the muscles on the opposite side e.g. contract the front, to stretch the muscles on the back and vice versa, the inside to stretch the outside, and vice versa. With the neck and the torso, you also need to rotate one way and then the opposite and vice versa.

- Make sure that you are actually contracting the muscle group (the agonists) that are supposed to be stretching muscles on the opposite side by placing your hand on them and feeling if they are actually contracting and hardening. For example, when standing, if you lean back you can feel the stretch of your abdominal and upper thigh muscles, place a hand on your lower back and feel the butt and lower back muscles contract and go hard to produce the stretch and relax the abdominals.
- It is a firm/strong contraction without being ballistic. Always ease into your contractions gradually increasing both their quality and intensity.
- Remember to relax the muscles being stretched and focus all your attention on the contracting muscle. You may previously have been co-contracting both muscle groups, so sometimes it takes a little mental effort to separate them into relaxing and contracting.

When they do contract correctly, you can detect a change in the feeling of the stretch. To do the opposite part of this stretch, simply lean forward and attempt to touch the toes contracting the abdominal and upper thigh muscles.

- Hold the stretch for five seconds after you get into position and repeat it backward and forward three times.
- **If you have an injury, then proceed carefully, gently and consciously.** If there has been lower back issues with disc bulging or compressed discs, then leaning forward and touching your toes or side bending may not be suitable until the back injury is more stable.
- Ant-Ag stretches will improve the strength and control of your joints as they produce isometric contractions which become more powerful as you improve the isolation and quality of contractoins.
- Proprioception or balance is also improved as many of the stretches are performed on one leg.
- Try to measure your improvement by evaluating with touch or final position how far you can go at the start of your exercises and how far you go after a few weeks. You will also notice that there is a big difference between the first stretch and the third stretch every time you do them. For example, if touching your toes then touch your finger tips to your shin to mark how far you go the first stretch and subsequent stretches.
- The best time to perform Ant-Ag stretching is just before bed as it loosens and relaxes the muscles increasing blood flow when you're healing during sleep. The next best time is in the morning after you have warmed up a little, and if you can do them another two or three times during the day then you will really notice an accelerated benefit and get quite competent with them quickly. **The concept of the stretches is simple** but performing them effectively can sometimes take a little re-education and increased control of muscle groups.
- Don't feel bad if you find them difficult to do at first, as often the stretches that you have been prescribed are for an area of your body that has had an imbalance, and it may take some time to normalise. The frequency of your stretching and "contemplative attention to your body" whilst you do them, will definitely fast track the effectiveness that you experience. Try to notice the difference between how you perform them at the beginning and then a few weeks later.
- Even after you have been doing the stretches for some time, keep on trying to do them better and you will find even further improvement.

This is just a basic description and obviously specific body parts have their specific stretches and little tips and techniques that enhance the Ant-Ag process. A video with audio will obviously be the best way to teach these new stretches.

Happy stretching!

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