Spring has sprung! This warmer season inspires many people to become more active. Whether you regularly exercise or decide to begin, remember that one of the most important rules before any physical routine is to S-T-R-E-T-C-H.

According to the Department of Health and Human Services, nearly two million people suffer from sports-related injuries and receive treatment in emergency departments every year[1]. Taking five to 10 minutes to stretch and warmup before strenuous workouts or sports-related activities can help protect the joints and muscles. It can also help people keep their momentum to complete daily activities.

Jeff Wright, physical therapist and director of the Comprehensive Rehabilitation Program at Doctors Community Hospital, shares his expert tips on preparing for an active season and knowing when it’s time to seek medical care.

Why is preparation so important?
Stretching can help improve joint flexibility and range of motion. Also, it allows muscles to work most effectively, potentially improving athletic performance and decreasing injury risks.

Moreover, stretching and warming up can increase blood flow to muscles, which can prevent cramps. Muscle cramps are not only painful, but possibly dangerous as they can lead to falls or increase the risk of drowning while swimming. Stretches and warmups can also prevent unintended injuries like muscle tears and strains.

What are the best ways to prepare for sports or exercise activities?
When warming up before sports or exercises, remember to:
+ Start with a light jog or walk before stretching—stretching cold muscles can lead to injuries
+ Focus on major muscle groups—calves, thighs, hips, lower back, neck and shoulders
+ Avoid bouncing while stretching to prevent injuries
+ Hold the stretch for about 30 seconds and breathe normally
+ Stop if pain persists while stretching
+ Stretch specific muscles used for the exercise or sport to be played first. For example, soccer players should include stretching their hamstrings during warmup routines

What should people do if they experience muscle pains or simple strains during physical activities?
Most muscle pains during physical activities are caused by simple strains and can be treated at home with R.I.C.E. therapy.
+ Rest: take a break from the activity
+ Ice: apply an ice pack to the sore area for 15 to 20 minutes, three times a day
+ Compression: use a compression bandage to reduce swelling
+ Elevation: raise the affected area to reduce swelling

When should people see a doctor or physical therapist?
If the muscle pain remains or worsens after a few days of home treatment, consult a doctor. Also, if severe muscle pain is experienced or is accompanied with redness, swelling or a rash, people should contact their doctors. Any time serious tears or breaks are suspected, people should immediately go to an emergency department.

Get Back in the Game
Doctors Community Hospital’s Comprehensive Rehabilitation Program provides a wide range of services to help people maintain or improve their physical mobility, body functions and quality of life. Our licensed, certified and experienced therapists deliver compassionate care and develop personalized treatment plans. From muscle pains to hamstring injuries, we are dedicated to helping people get back in the game and enjoying active lives.
Also, the hospital has experienced sports medicine physicians available in our Capital Orthopaedic Specialists Department.

To learn more, visit DCHweb.org or call 301-DCH-4YOU (301-324-4968).