Warming Up for Success

Many table tennis players go straight to the table when they want to play. Their muscles are cold and tight, and they not only can't play their best but can be injured before their muscles warm up. Before playing, you should warm up your muscles, stretch them, and go through some sort of table warm-up.

WHY IS WARMING UP IMPORTANT?

Warming up before play is important so you can play your best, and so you won't be injured. You can't possibly play as well with cold, tight muscles as with warm, loose ones. Any sudden unexpected move (a lunge for an edge ball, a sudden stretch to reach that ball to the wide forehand) can lead to injury. There are few things more frustrating than to sit on the sidelines with an injury.

Many players warm up at the table. This is better than nothing, but only a few specific muscles get warmed up that way. It just isn't enough. There should be four parts to your table tennis warm-up, as follows:

1. *Warming the muscles.* Start any playing session by some easy jogging or brisk walking to get the blood flowing into the muscles. This prepares your muscles for activity and warms them up so they are ready to be stretched.
2. *Stretching.* Now that your muscles are relatively warm, stretch the ones you will use the most (see next section). Use slow, easy stretches. Hold all stretches 6 to 8 seconds. To avoid injuries, never bounce when you stretch, and never stretch a cold muscle.
3. *Table warm-up.* Go through a routine that covers each shot that you may use. Now you're ready to play!
4. *Cool-down.* After you finish playing, your muscles are warm and flexible. This is the best time to stretch and to improve general flexibility.

WARMING THE MUSCLES

Jog around the playing area a few times. Don't go too fast—you don't want to injure yourself! All you want to do is get the blood flowing a little faster than normal and warm up the muscles. Later, when you've learned two-step footwork (Step 5), you can practice that slowly as a warm-up.

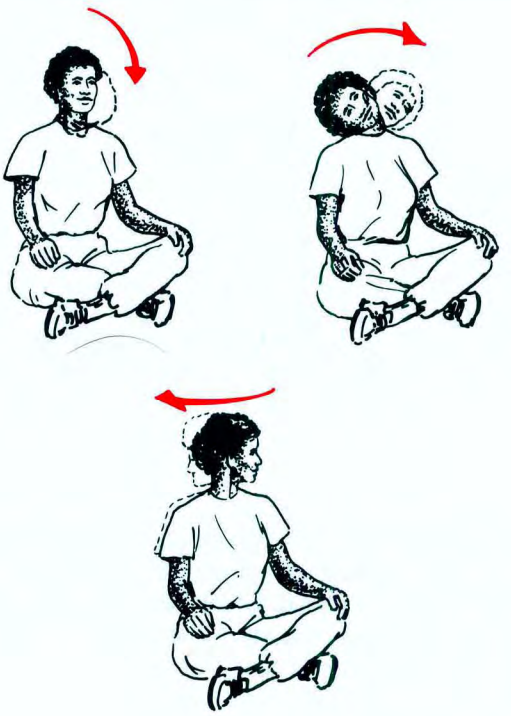
STRETCHING

Here is a modified version of the stretching routine used by the resident table tennis athletes at the Olympic Training Center at Colorado Springs. Feel free to vary it. On all stretches, move slowly through full range of motion.

Neck

Five-part Stretch: Stand tall with your back erect. Slowly drop your chin toward your chest. Hold for 1 second then bring your head back to its original position. Now let your head tilt to the right side. Hold for 6 to 8 seconds then bring your head erect again. Repeat on the left side. Finally, rotate your head to the right as if you are looking behind you. Hold for 6 to 8 seconds then bring your head erect again. Repeat on the left side.

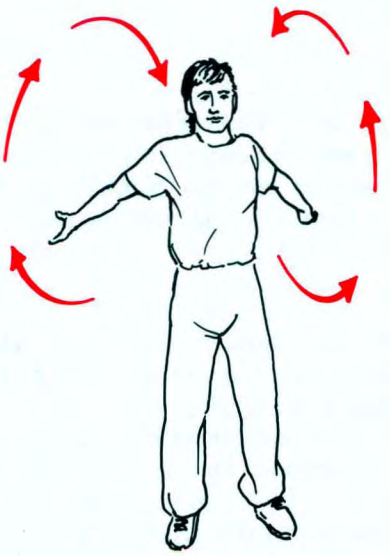
Inhale as you bring your head back to the original position. Remember to only move your head, not your spine. Do each of these stretches 10 times.



Shoulders

Arm Circles: From a standing position, rotate both arms slowly forward in a circle. After circling forward for 10 rotations, change direction and circle both arms slowly backward 10 times. Inhale when

you raise your arms and exhale when you lower them.



Wrist

Press and Extend: Slowly squeeze a rubber or tennis ball in your palm, then extend your fingers, 10 to 20 times. This helps to strengthen your wrist and forearm while also warming up your wrist for range-of-motion exercises.

Trunk/Back/Hips

Side Reach: Stand with your legs about shoulder-width apart while keeping your back straight. Reach high above your head with one arm while leaving the other dangling at your side. Feel the stretch in your side. Alternate on each side 10 times.

Trunk Twist: Sit with your back erect and your right leg straight in front of you. Bend your left leg, crossing it over your right leg. Rest your left foot flat on the floor outside of your right knee. Now slowly rotate your trunk, placing your right elbow outside of your left thigh. Place your left hand on the floor directly behind your buttocks. Push against your thigh with your right elbow and feel the stretch in your hips and your lower back. Perform the stretch on each side three times. Hold the position each time for 6 to 8 seconds.

Hamstrings

Sit and Reach: Sit on the floor with your right leg straight and the sole of your left foot touching the inside of your right thigh. Slowly bend forward from the hips and try to grasp your right

foot with both hands. Stretch your arms as far as you can comfortably. You will feel tension in the back of your right thigh. Hold for 6 to 8 seconds, then release. Repeat the same exercise with the left leg extended. Perform the stretch three times on each leg.

Quadriceps

Stork Stand: Stand facing a wall. Extend your right arm and place it on the wall for balance. Bend your right leg and lift the foot toward your buttocks. Grab the foot with your left hand and gently pull the foot up and closer to your buttocks. You can feel the stretch in the front of your leg increase as you pull harder. Hold the stretch for 6 to 8 seconds then repeat the stretch with the left leg. You can further the stretch by bending forward at the waist.

Calves

Wall Lean: Stand facing a wall with your arms extended. Keeping your feet together and your knees straight, lean forward and feel the stretch in your calves. Hold for 6 to 8 seconds. Bend your knees, slightly round your back, and hold for 6 to 8 seconds. Remember to keep your heels on the floor and your feet parallel. Resume your stretch by lengthening your back and straightening your knees. Alternately repeat the stretches 10 times.

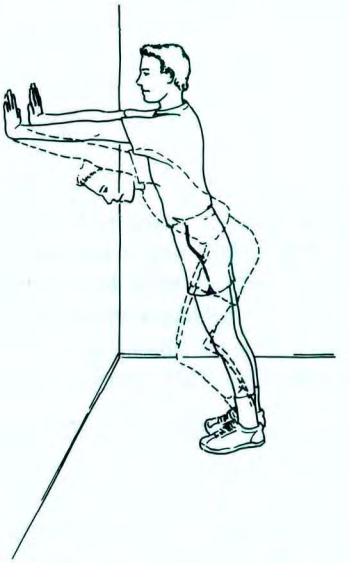


TABLE WARM-UP

If you don't recognize the drills mentioned, you will later as you go through this book. Depending on your playing style, you should vary this table warm-up—for example, a chopper would want to warm up using a chopping stroke. The following is a basic table warm-up sequence.

1. Hit forehand to forehand, crosscourt, 2 to 5 minutes.
2. Hit backhand to backhand, crosscourt, 2 to 5 minutes.
3. Hit forehand to backhand, down the line, 1 to 2 minutes on each line.
4. Do a side-to-side footwork drill, 2 to 5 minutes each.
5. Practice pushing all over, 2 to 5 minutes. Beginners should do backhand to backhand and forehand to forehand.
6. Loop forehands against block, 2 to 5 minutes each. Have your partner move you around a little bit. Then do the same with your backhand loop, if you have one.
7. Serve backspin, have partner push, and you attack. Play out the point, 2 to 5 minutes each.

After a table warm-up, you can either continue with a practice session or play matches.

COOL-DOWN

At the end of your practice or play, perform the same stretches you did before your table warm-up sequence. Now that your body is warmed up, you can easily improve your flexibility. You will find that your muscles may stretch more than they did before you started playing. Stretching them now will leave you even more flexible for your next game.