

Flexibility Exercises

Flexibility exercises in their simplest form stretch and elongate muscles. Good flexibility is as important a part of fitness as stamina. Muscles must be strong, but they also have to be long (as opposed to contracted) to work optimally. In fact, stretching can do a lot more for your figure than aerobic exercise because flexibility work results in a supple, toned, and streamlined body. Moreover, the benefits of greater flexibility may go beyond the physical to include stress reduction and promotion of a greater sense of well-being. Exercise disciplines which incorporate stretching with breath control and meditation include yoga, tai chi, and Pilates.

In creating your flexibility workouts and completing them a minimum of 2-3 times a week, it's again important to include stretches for all of the major muscle groups in your body. You will regain some of your flexibility by stretching regularly, although your gains may be ultimately limited by your genetic makeup, arthritis, metabolic control, and other variables. Nonetheless, even people with type 2 diabetes experience flexibility gains by doing just eight weeks of stretching of their major upper- and lower-body muscles thrice weekly in conjunction with a moderate resistance training program, so likely everyone will benefit to some degree from regular flexibility training and from moving their joints through their full range of motion.

Flexibility Training “Do’s” and “Don’ts”

Do:

- Use a full range of motion around joints when stretching
- Complete at least one stretch per major muscle group, optimally holding each stretch for 15 to 30 seconds, or move dynamically (slowly) throughout the movements
- Stretch all parts of your body two to three days per week
- Complete equal stretching exercises on both sides of your body or a joint
- Breathe deeply during all stretches to relax your muscles more

Don’t:

- Bounce during stretches, as doing so can cause muscle tears and joint injuries
- Forget to stretch opposing muscle groups equally (e.g., quads and hamstrings)
- Stretch to the point of causing sharp pain or intense discomfort
- Continue with a stretch if you feel a sharp or immediate pain in any joint or muscle
- Hold your breath or strain while stretching

To get the maximum benefit from static stretching, perform each stretch slowly. Doing the exercises correctly, with good form, is much more important than doing them quickly. To have any lasting effect on the muscle being stretched, you need to hold the stretch for at least 10 seconds to start, or do dynamic (movement) stretching. The more regularly you stretch, the better you become at judging how far to take your body. Aim to increase the duration of your stretches, so that you are eventually able to hold them for up to 30 seconds, the point at which muscles optimally start to lengthen. Also, be sure to stretch both sides of your body equally, as well as opposing muscles on both sides of a joint (such as biceps and triceps on the upper arm).

Upper-Body Stretches

#1: Neck stretch

Directions:

- Stand with your feet apart and your knees slightly bent, or sit in a chair with your back straight and your feet on the floor.
- Relax your shoulders and gently bend your head toward your right shoulder.
- For an extra stretch, reach up with your right hand and apply a gentle pressure against the left side of your head in the direction of the stretch.
- Repeat on the left side.
- In addition, stretch your neck by tipping your head forward toward your chest and backward toward your spine.



#2: Shoulder/upper back stretch

Directions:

- Stand with your feet a little apart, your knees slightly bent, and your stomach muscles slightly tensed.
- Relax your shoulders and pull your right arm horizontally across your chest by grabbing on to your elbow with your left hand.
- Repeat with your left arm.
- You can also do this exercise while seated in a chair.



#3: Chest/shoulder stretch

Directions:

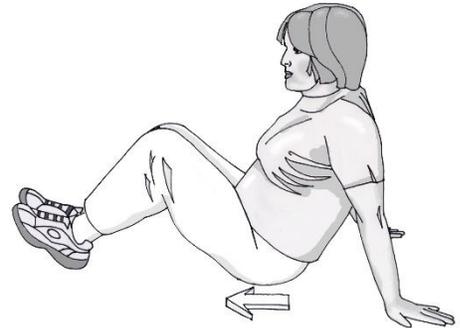
- If standing, bend your knees slightly, tense your stomach muscles, and relax your shoulders.
- If seated, sit forward in your chair to make room for your arms to go behind you.
- Cross your hands behind your back and concentrate on bringing your shoulder blades toward each other as far as you can.



#4: Shoulder/biceps stretch

Directions:

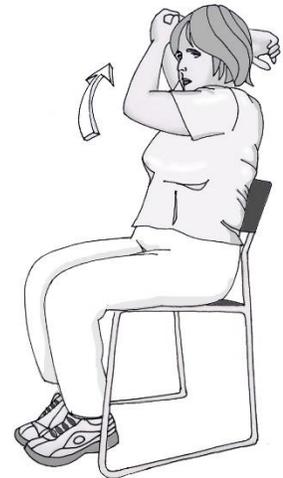
- Sit on the floor with both legs extended out in front of you and your knees bent.
- Keeping your back straight, put your hands behind you with your palms flat on the floor and your fingers pointing away from your body.
- With your hands stationary, scoot your bottom forward until you feel the stretch in your shoulders.
- Hold this position.



#5: Upper back/triceps stretch

Directions:

- Sitting or standing, grab your right elbow with your left hand and push it straight up and back until the upper portion of your right arm is next to your right ear.
- Keep your spine and neck as straight as possible during this movement.
- Repeat this stretch with your left arm.



#6: Wrist stretch

Directions:

- Press your hands together with your elbows down.
- Raise your elbows at nearly parallel to the floor as possible, while keeping your hands together in a prayer position.
- Hold and then repeat.

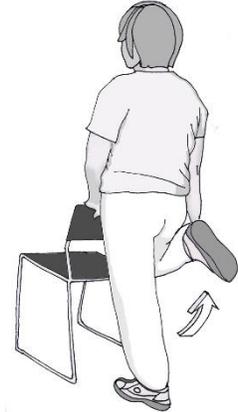


Lower-Body Stretches

#1: Quad (front of thigh) stretch

Directions:

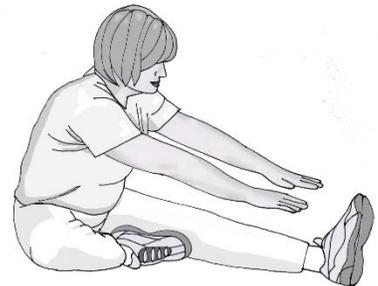
- Holding on to a chair or the wall with your left hand, grab your right ankle with your right hand by bending at the knee, and bring your heel as close as you can toward your bottom (touching it, if possible).
- If that stretch is easy for you, then take it one step further by leaning forward slightly from that position and pulling your heel farther up and about six inches away from your bottom for maximum stretch.
- Repeat with the other leg.
- You can also do this stretch by lying on your side and stretching the leg on top.



#2: Hamstring (back of thigh) stretch

Directions:

- Sitting on the floor with your back straight, place your legs in a “V.”
- Next, bend your right knee and bring your foot in toward your groin area.
- Gently lean out over your left leg to stretch the back of your left thigh (don’t worry if you aren’t able to lean very far).
- Repeat with the other leg.
- Reminder: never bend your knee outward in the opposite direction (even though you may see other people doing so) to avoid injury to the knee joint.



#3: Alternate Hamstring (back of thigh) stretch

Directions:

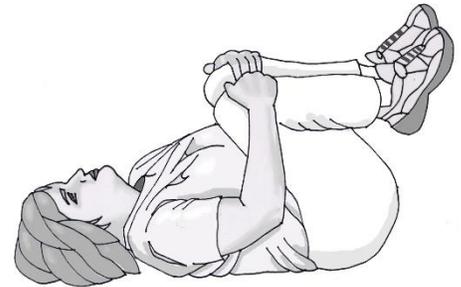
- Stand behind a chair with your legs straight.
- Hold the back of the chair with both hands.
- Bend forward from your hips, not from your waist, keeping your entire back and shoulders straight until your upper body is parallel to the floor.
- Hold this position, relax, and repeat.



#4: Gluteal (bottom) stretch

Directions:

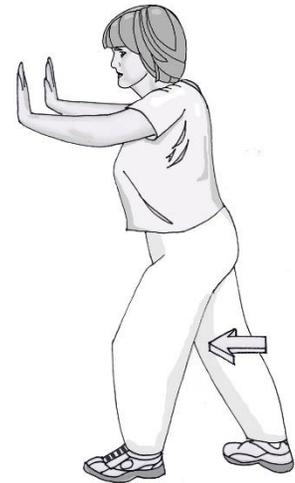
- Lie on your back with both knees bent and your feet flat on the floor.
- Grab both of your knees with your hands and pull them up toward your chest as far as you can.
- Hold this position for several seconds before releasing.
- You can also do this stretch with one leg at a time.



#5: Calf stretch

Directions:

- With straight arms, put your hands on a wall in front of you, and place your feet shoulder-width apart.
- Move your right foot about twelve inches more straight back while bending your left knee.
- Holding your back and your right knee straight, bend your elbows slightly and lean in a few inches toward the wall to stretch your right calf.
- Then, keeping your foot flat on the ground, slightly bend your right knee for an even greater stretch.
- Repeat this exercise with the other leg.



#6: Ankle stretch

Directions:

- With your shoes off, sit toward the front end of a chair and lean back, using pillows to support your back.
- Slide your feet away from the chair and in front of you to stretch out your legs.
- With your heels still on the floor, point your toes away from you until you feel a stretch in the front part of your ankles, and hold the position.
- If you don't feel a stretch, lift your heels slightly off the floor while doing this stretch.
- For a different stretch, try pointing your toes to the left and the right in addition to forward, and roll your foot around at the ankles in circles going clockwise and then in reverse (which will also help improve your balance).



Other Stretches

#1: Abdominal stretch

Directions:

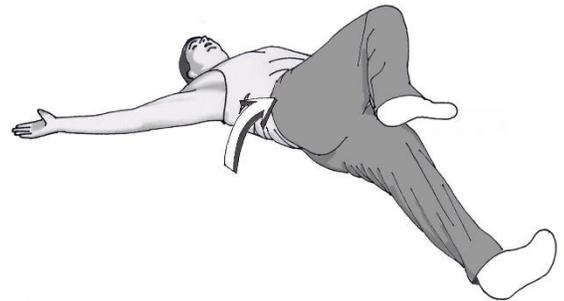
- Lie down on your front with your arms over your head.
- Pull your arms in until you are propped up on your elbows.
- Gently arch your neck backward as far as is comfortable toward your bottom, keeping your hips on the floor.
- Hold the stretch for several seconds.



#2: Back/gluteal stretch

Directions:

- Lie down on your back with your arms straight out from your sides.
- Bend your right knee and then stretch it across your left leg while trying to keep your right hip on the ground.
- Repeat with the other leg.



#3: Complete back (cat) stretch

Directions:

- Kneel on all fours, keeping your knees in line with your hips, your hands in line with your shoulders, and everything in line with your spine, which should be flat.
- Breathe in as you slowly arch your back toward the ceiling with your abs tight, your pelvis tilted, and your gaze toward your navel.
- Breathe out as you reverse the action, drawing your chest toward the floor.



#4: Total body stretch

Directions:

- Lie on your back with your legs together and extend your arms straight up over your head on the floor.
- Tighten your abs and press your lower back firmly to the floor.
- Take a deep breath in and, as you breathe out, extend both your arms and legs as far away from your body and out to the sides as you can.
- Hold for several seconds before returning to the starting position.

