

How To Stretch

Stretching is easy to learn. But there is a right way and a wrong way to stretch. The right way is a relaxed, sustained stretch with your attention focused on the muscles being stretched. The wrong way (unfortunately practiced by many people), is to bounce up and down, or to stretch to the point of pain: these methods can actually do more harm than good.

If you stretch correctly and regularly, you will find that every movement you make becomes easier. It will take time to loosen up tight muscles or muscle groups, but time is quickly forgotten when you start to feel good.

The Easy Stretch

When you begin a stretch, spend 10-30 seconds in the *easy stretch*. No bouncing! Go to the point where you feel a *mild tension*, and relax as you hold the stretch. The feeling of tension should subside as you hold the position. If it does not, ease off slightly and find a degree of tension that is comfortable. The easy stretch reduces muscular tightness and readies the tissues for the developmental stretch.

The Developmental Stretch

After the easy stretch, move slowly into the *developmental stretch*. Again, no bouncing. Move a fraction of an inch further until you again feel a mild tension and hold for 10-30 seconds. Be in control. Again, the tension should diminish; if not, ease off slightly. The developmental stretch fine-tunes the muscles and increases flexibility.

Breathing

Your breathing should be slow, rhythmical and under control. If you are bending forward to do a stretch, exhale as you bend forward and then breathe slowly as you hold the stretch. Do not hold your breath while stretching. If a stretch position inhibits your natural breathing pattern, then you are obviously not relaxed. Just ease up on the stretch so you can breathe naturally.

Counting

At first, silently count the seconds for each stretch; this will insure that you

hold the proper tension for a long enough time. After a while, you will be stretching by the way it feels, without the distraction of counting.

The Stretch Reflex

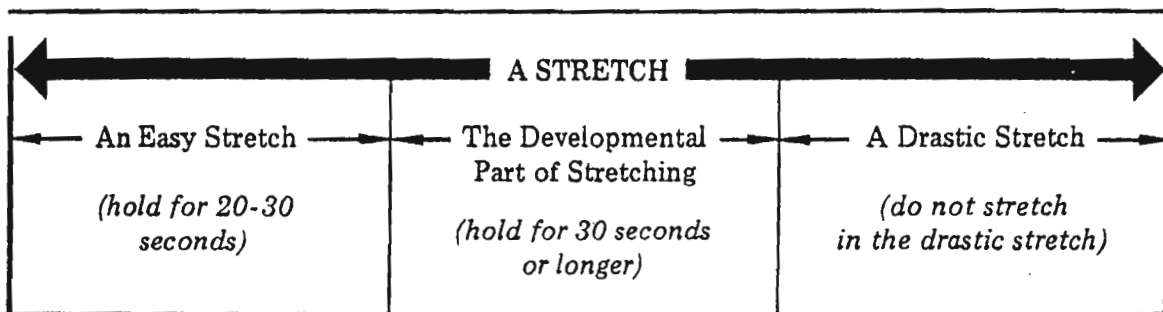
Your muscles are protected by a mechanism called the *stretch reflex*. Any time you stretch the muscle fibers too far (either by bouncing or overstretching), a nerve reflex responds by sending a signal to the muscles to contract; this keeps the muscles from being injured. Therefore, when you stretch too far, you tighten the very muscles you are trying to stretch! (You get a similar involuntary muscle reaction when you accidentally touch something hot; before you can think about it, your body quickly moves away from the heat.)

Holding a stretch as far as you can go or bouncing up and down strains the muscles and activates the stretch reflex. These harmful methods cause pain, as well as physical damage due to the microscopic tearing of muscle fibers. This tearing leads to the formation of scar tissue in the muscles, with a gradual loss of elasticity. The muscles become tight and sore. How can you get enthused about daily stretching and exercise when these potentially injurious methods are used?

Many of us were conditioned in high school to the idea of “no gain without pain.” We learned to associate pain with physical improvement, and were taught that “. . . the more it hurts, the more you get out of it.” But don’t be fooled. Stretching, when done correctly, is not painful. Learn to pay attention to your body, for pain is an indication that something is *wrong*.

The easy and developmental stretches, as described on the previous page do not activate the stretch reflex and do not cause pain.

This Diagram Will Give You an Idea of a “Good Stretch”:

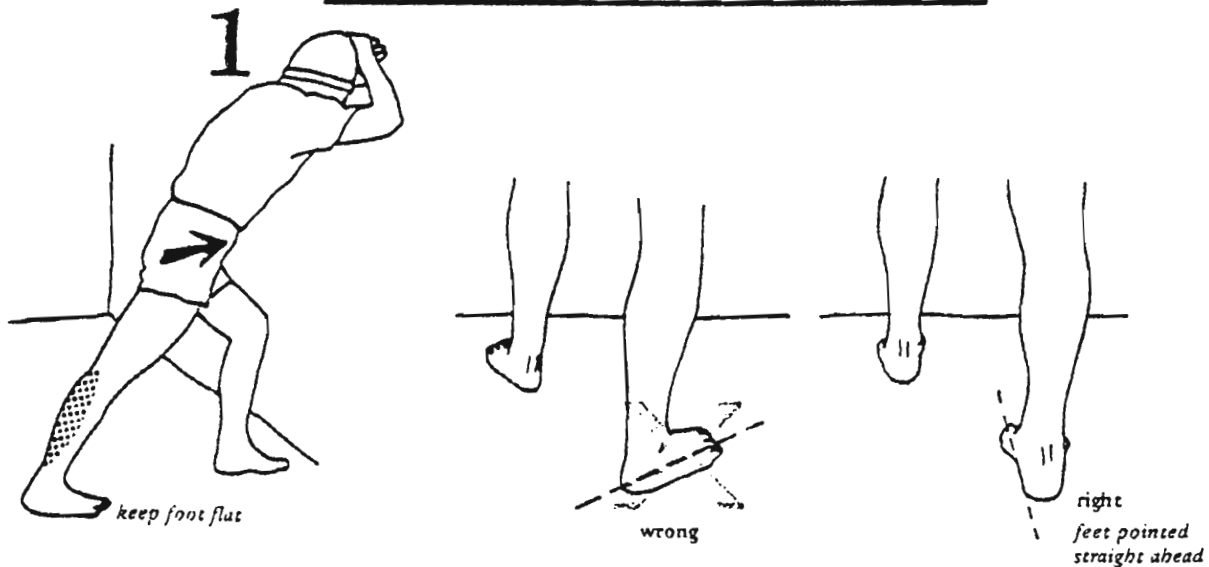


The straight line diagram represents the stretch which is possible with your muscles and their connective tissue. You will find that your flexibility will naturally increase when you stretch, first in the easy, then in the developmental phase. By regularly stretching with comfortable and painless feelings you will be able to go beyond your present limits and come closer to your personal potential. □

Getting Started

After you have gone through these beginning stretches, you will start to develop a feeling for correct stretching. It is important to be aware of proper body alignment when stretching and to learn how to do each of the stretches in a way that is right for *your* body. Once you have learned how to stretch your body correctly, it is easy to learn and use the stretches in this book.

(Dotted areas indicate the parts of the body in which you will probably feel the stretch, but because no two people are the same, it is possible that you may feel a stretch in an area other than those marked.)

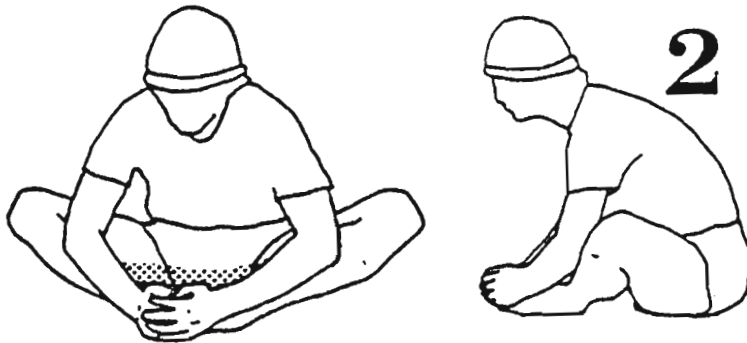


Let's start with the calf stretch, a stretch for the back of the lower leg and ankle. Face a fence, wall, or something you can lean on for support. Stand a little distance from this support and rest your forearms on the support with your forehead on the back of your hands. Now bend one knee and bring it toward the support. The back leg should be straight with the foot flat and pointed straight ahead or slightly toed-in.

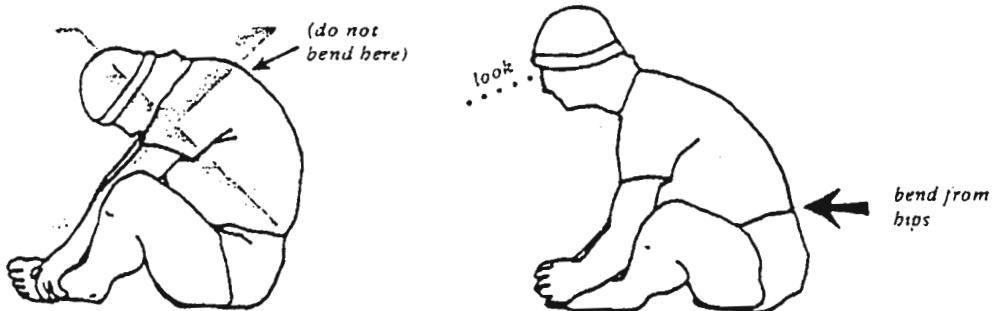
Now, without changing the position of your feet, slowly move your hips forward as you keep the back leg straight and your *foot flat*. Create an *easy feeling* of stretch in your calf muscle (*gastrocnemius*).

Hold an easy stretch for 20 seconds, then increase the stretch feeling very slightly into a developmental stretch for 20 seconds. Don't overstretch.

Now stretch the other calf. Does one leg feel different than the other? Is one leg more flexible than the other?



Sitting Groin Stretch: Next, sit on the floor. Put the soles of your feet together with your hands around your feet and toes. Be sure to keep your heels a comfortable distance from your crotch. Now gently pull your upper body forward until you feel an easy stretch in your groin area (inside of upper thighs). Hold an easy stretch for 20 seconds. If you are doing it right, it will feel good; the longer you hold the stretch, the less you should feel it. If possible, without strain, keep your elbows on the outside of your lower legs. This will help give the stretch position stability and balance.



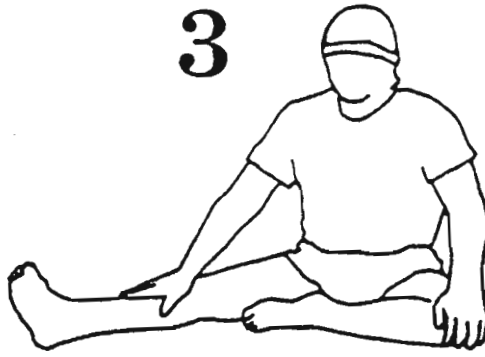
Do not initiate the movement forward from head and shoulders. This will round the shoulders and put pressure on lower back.

Be sure to concentrate on making the initial move forward from your hips. Keep your lower back flat. Look out in front of you.

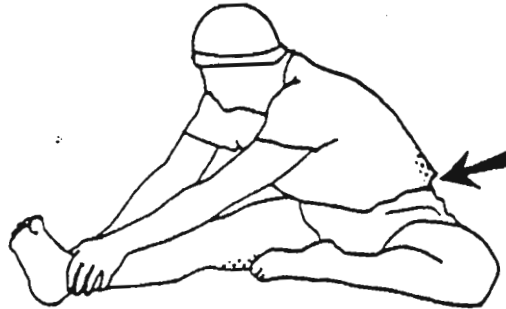
After you feel the tension diminish slightly, increase the stretch by gently pulling yourself a little further into it. Now it should feel a bit more intense *but not painful*. Hold this for about 25 seconds. If the stretch is right in this developmental phase, the feeling of tension should slightly decrease or stay the same the longer the stretch is held, but it should not increase.

Slowly come out of the stretch. Please, no jerky, quick, bouncing movements! You must stop and hold each stretch so you can *really feel* what is happening with each position.

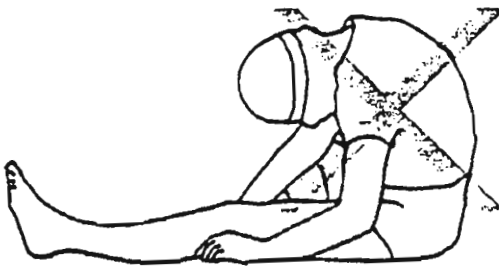
3



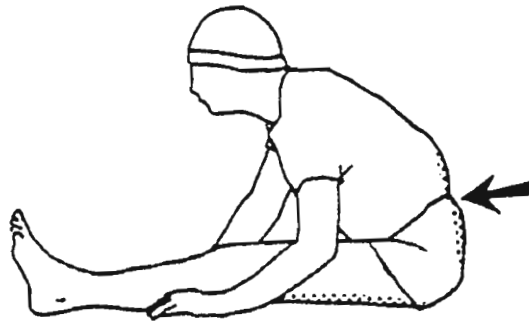
Next, straighten the right leg as you keep the left leg bent. The sole of the left foot should be facing the inside of the right upper leg. (Do not keep the knee of the straight leg “locked”.) You are in a straight leg, bent knee position.



Now, to stretch the back of the upper right leg (hamstrings) and left side of the lower back (some will feel a stretch in the lower back, others won't), bend forward *from your hips* until the slightest, easiest feeling of stretch is created. Hold this easy stretch for 30 seconds. When you find what you think is the right stretch, touch the quadriceps of your right thigh to make sure that these muscles are relaxed. They should be spongy or soft, not tight or hard.



To find the stretch, do not make the initial movement with your head and shoulders. Do not try to touch your forehead to your knee. This will only encourage a backward tilt of the hips or pelvis and round your shoulders.



Be sure to initiate the stretch from the hips. Keep your chin in a neutral position (not held upward or downward). This will help keep the head and neck in a good position during the stretch. Keep shoulders and arms relaxed.



Be sure the foot of the leg being stretched is upright with ankle and toes relaxed. This will keep you aligned through ankle, knee, and hip.

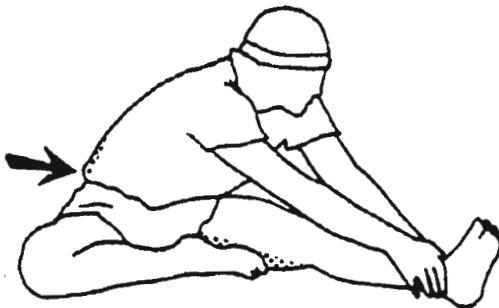


Do not let your leg turn to the outside because this causes misalignment of the leg and hip.



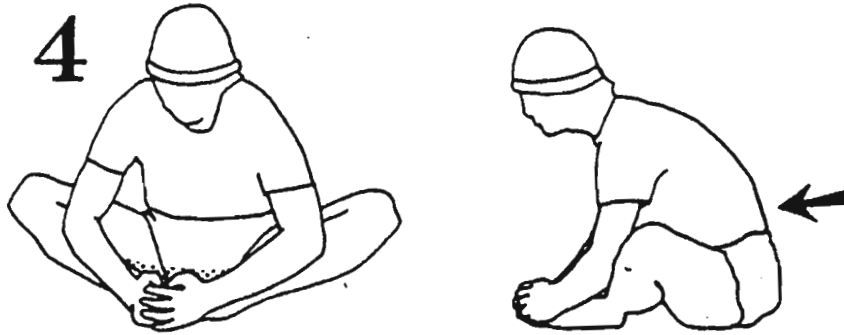
Use a towel, if necessary, around the bottom of your foot to help you do this stretch. If you are not very flexible the towel will help greatly in creating and holding the right tension.

After the feeling of the easy stretch has subsided, slowly go into the developmental stretch. To find this developmental stretch you may only have to bend forward a fraction of an inch. Do not worry about how far you can go. A *very slight* distance in your bend forward may be all that is needed to reach the developmental phase. Remember, we are all different.



Now slowly come out of the stretch. Do the same stretch on the other side for left hamstring and right side of lower back. Remember to keep the front of your thigh relaxed and your foot upright with ankle and toes relaxed. First, do an easy stretch for 30 seconds, and then slowly find the developmental phase of the stretch and hold for 25 seconds. It takes time and personal sensitivity to stretch properly.

Develop your ability to stretch by how you feel and not by how far you can stretch.



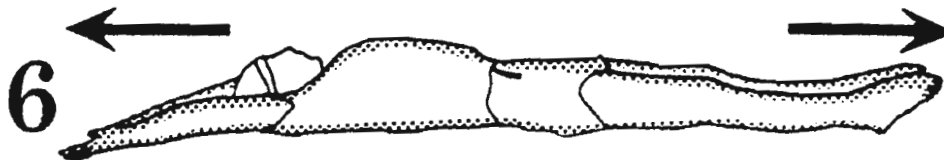
Repeat the sitting groin stretch. How does this feel as compared to the first time you did it? Any change at all?

A number of things are more important for you than concentrating solely on increasing flexibility:

1. Relaxation of tense areas such as feet, toes, hands, wrists, shoulders when stretching.
 2. Learning how to find and control the right feeling of stretching.
 3. Awareness of lower back, head and shoulders, and leg alignment during the stretch.
 4. Adjusting to your changing body, for every day the body feels slightly different.
-

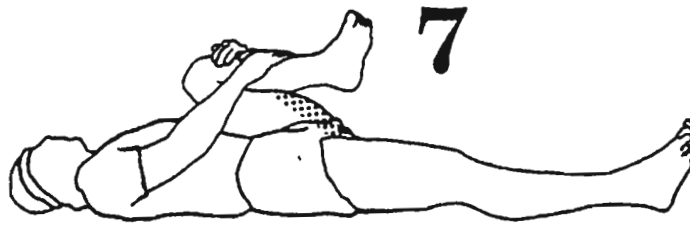


Lying Groin Stretch: Now lie on your back with the soles of your feet together. Let your knees fall apart. Relax your hips as you let gravity give you a very mild stretch in your groin area (inside of upper legs). Stay in this very relaxed position for 40 seconds. Really concentrate on letting go of any tension, do not force anything. The stretch feeling will be subtle and should happen naturally.

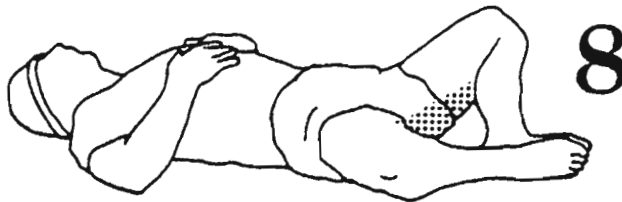


Slowly straighten both legs. With your arms overhead, reach with your arms and hands while you point your toes. This is an elongation stretch. Hold a

controlled, good stretch for 5 seconds, then relax. Repeat 3 times. Each time you stretch, gently pull in your abdominal muscles to make the middle of your body thin. This feels really good. It stretches arms, shoulders, spine, abdominals, intercostal muscles of rib cage, feet, and ankles. This is an excellent, easy stretch to do first thing in the morning while still in bed.



Next, bend one knee and gently pull it toward your chest until you feel an easy stretch. Hold for 40 seconds. You may feel a stretch in your lower back and back of the upper leg. If you do not feel any stretch, don't worry about it. This is an excellent position for the entire body, good for the lower back and very relaxing whether you feel a stretch or not. Do both sides and compare. Gradually get to know yourself.



Repeat the lying groin stretch and just relax for 60 seconds. Let go of any tension in your feet, hands, and shoulders. You may want to do this stretch with your eyes closed.

How To Sit Up From A Lying Position:



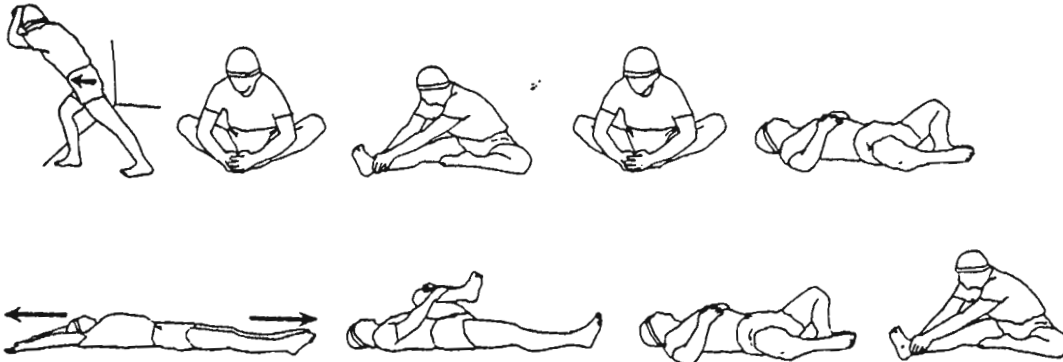
Bend both knees and roll over onto one side. While resting on your side, use your hands to push yourself up into a sitting position. By using your hands and arms this way, you take the pressure or stress off the back.

9



Now repeat the stretches for your hamstrings. Have you changed at all? Do you feel more limber and less tense than before stretching?

SUMMARY



These are just a few stretches to get you started. I want you to understand that stretching is not a contest in flexibility. Your flexibility will naturally improve with proper stretching. Stretch with feelings you can enjoy. □

Many of the stretches should be held for 30-60 seconds. But after a while the time you hold stretches will vary. Sometimes you may want to hold one longer because you are extra tight that day, or you are just enjoying the stretch. *Remember that no two days are the same* so you must gauge your stretching by how you feel at the moment.
