

# Stretching Exercises

This article provides information on stretching exercises that are useful in conjunction with regular exercise. Some of these stretches may also be useful in an office setting as they may be completed while sitting at a desk. As well as enhancing a regular exercise regimen, these stretches may assist in relieving the stresses and strains put on the body when a person spends much of the day sitting at a desk.

## Side of Your Neck

Stretching the side of your neck (upper trapezius) eases soreness from reading or working at a computer too long. Done daily, this stretch can help prevent more serious problems in the neck, upper back and shoulder.

1. Tilt your head to one side
2. Grasp your head with the arm your head is tilted toward and gently pull
3. Hold for 10-20 seconds, and repeat three to five times
4. Repeat the sequence, tilting your head toward the other side

## Back of Your Neck

Tension can often form in the back of your neck (levator scapulae muscle), sometimes to the point that small spasms occur. This stretch can help ease a stiff neck.

1. Tilt and turn your head to one side
2. Using the arm your head is tilted toward, reach over and gently pull the head down and to the side
3. Keep the opposite arm behind your back
4. Hold for 10-20 seconds, and repeat three to five times
5. Repeat the sequence for the other side

## Chest

The chest, or pectoral, stretch is good for posture. It's also a good exercise after weightlifting and bench pressing. Stretching your pectoral muscles regularly can prevent shoulder and arm problems. When you do this exercise, you'll feel stretching across the chest.

1. Stand facing a corner about one to two feet from the walls, with your hands on the walls
2. Lean into the corner until you feel stretching across your chest
3. Hold for 10-20 seconds, and repeat three to five times
4. Vary the stretch by raising or lowering your arms

## Lower Back

The lower back stretch (or cat stretch) is for the upper and lower back muscles that help move your spine. When you do this stretch, go slowly enough to feel each part of your spine move. As you arch, feel your shoulder blades move away from your spine. You should feel your shoulder blades come together as you return to the starting position.

1. Get on your hands and knees
2. Tighten your tummy muscles, squeeze your buttocks and tuck your tailbone
3. Hold for 10-20 seconds, then flatten your back to the starting position
4. Repeat three to five times

## Buttocks

The piriformis muscle courses through your buttock. Tightening of this muscle can irritate a major leg nerve called the sciatic nerve, and cause pain to shoot down the leg. This type of pain is associated with the condition known as sciatica. Good flexibility in this area is important to prevent more problems.

1. Lie on your back
2. Flatten your lower back against the floor
3. Cross one knee over the other and pull it toward your chest
4. Hold the position for 10-20 seconds, and repeat three to five times
5. Reverse legs and repeat the sequence

## Back of Your Legs

Flexible hamstrings help prevent injuries during activity and relieve stress from your lower back. Hamstrings attach to your pelvis, so when they tighten, they pull the pelvis back and strain your lumbar, or lower back, area. People who sit a lot and athletes who don't warm up properly tend to have tight hamstrings.

1. Sit on the floor or on a chair with one leg propped up
2. Keep your back straight, lean forward toward the extended leg until you feel a stretch
3. For a more intense stretch, pull your foot back toward your forehead as you lean forward
4. Hold for 10-20 seconds, and repeat three to five times
5. Switch legs and repeat the sequence

## Front of Your Legs

Your quadriceps attach to the front of your pelvis, so when they tighten, they pull your pelvis forward, causing stress on the back. If you're sedentary, or have had hip surgery, these muscles gradually shorten. When your quads are tight, you may find it difficult to stand erect, and painful to lie on your stomach.

1. Stand near a wall or other support
2. Bend one knee and grasp the ankle of that leg behind you
3. Bend the knee further by pulling the ankle toward your buttocks
4. Keep your back straight, and keep the bent knee in line with your supporting leg
5. Hold for 10-20 seconds, and repeat three to five times
6. Repeat the sequence with other leg

## Inner Thighs

Regular stretching of your inner and outer thighs can relieve knee strain.

1. Sit on the floor with the bottoms of your feet touching each other
2. Grasp your feet
3. Gently push your knees toward the floor with a slow, steady motion
4. Feel the stretching in your inner thigh
5. Hold for 10-20 seconds, and repeat three to five times

## Outer Thighs

1. Stand with your legs crossed
2. Slowly bend to the side and push out your hip in the opposite direction
3. You should feel a stretch in the outer thigh of the side you're bending away from
4. Hold for 10-20 seconds, and repeat three to five times
5. Reverse legs and repeat the sequence

## Calves

The calf (gastrocnemius) stretch can prevent a charley horse, or muscle strain. This stretch maintains the health of your calf muscle and Achilles tendon. It's important to stretch your calf muscle before and after a run or vigorous walk. (This stretch can also help ease strain from wearing high heels.)

1. Stand facing a wall about three feet away, with your back straight
2. Move one foot to within a few inches of the wall, then press the heel of your back foot into the floor as you lean toward the wall
3. Feel a stretch behind your knee and hold for 10-20 seconds
4. Repeat three to five times

## Sources

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