

Why stretch?

Stretching out your muscles can:

- **Increase flexibility** Tasks such as lifting packages or hurrying to catch a bus become easier and less tiring if you stretch on a regular basis.
- **Improve range of motion in joints** Elongated muscles may help keep you mobile and less prone to falls and related injuries — especially as you age.
- **Improve circulation** Stretching increases blood flow to your muscles to keep them functioning properly and speed recovery after injuries.
- **Relieve stress** Stretching relaxes tense muscles after activity.

When to stretch

A review of studies that addressed the issue of stretching published in *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise* reported that flexibility exercises (stretching) when done after a full workout, or at least after a brief cardio warm-up, help to maintain circulation around the joints, keeping muscles healthy where they're most apt to get injured.

However, the study did note that the jury is still out on whether or not stretching can prevent injury among competitive or recreational athletes. Still, it is well known that stretching helps keep muscles elongated, helping you maintain your level of performance throughout an activity.

How to stretch

Stretching should be performed gently. Remember to breathe freely as you hold each stretch for at least 30 seconds. Keep the stretch static; don't bounce. Slowly come out of every stretch. Repeat two or three times before moving on to your next group of muscles. Expect to feel slight tension in your muscles while stretching. But if you stretch to the point of pain, you may have gone too far.

Here five easy stretches for the end of your workout.

Lower-back stretch

Lie on mat, bend both knees with feet on the mat, keeping knees and feet together. Slowly lift your knees toward your chest. Reach around behind knees with hands, hugging knees into chest, while keeping back flat to the mat. Hold 30 seconds.



Outer-hip stretch

Lie on mat with knees bent. Place your right ankle on the left thigh just below left knee, allowing your right knee to fall outward. Reach around left leg with both hands and gently pull the left knee up and toward the chest. Feel mild tension in the right hip and buttocks. Hold 30 seconds. Repeat on other side.



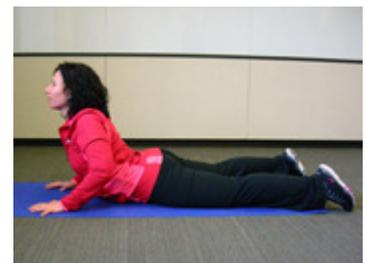
Hamstring stretch

Lie on mat with knees bent, feet flat on mat. Lift right leg, with leg straight, knee soft, foot flexed. Now, with both hands reach around right leg. Keep hips to the mat, as you gently pull right leg toward your body, bringing the knee as close to the chest without bending it. Feel mild tension in back of upper right leg. Hold 30 seconds. Repeat on the other leg. If you have difficulty keeping your leg straight, try placing a towel across the bottom of your foot, holding the ends of the towel with both hands and pulling your leg towards your body until you feel the stretch.



Abdominal stretch (cobra in yoga)

Lie face down on mat with palms down on mat directly under shoulders, toes pointed. Exhale as you extend arms almost to a straight position, elbows slightly bent, keeping head in line with the spine. Feel mild tension through the abdominal muscles, but don't push too hard or you'll overextend your back. Only lift to where you feel comfortable. Hold 30 seconds. Repeat 3 times.



Kneeling superman reach (child's pose in yoga)

Kneel on mat. Sit back, buttocks toward heels, with arms extending out in front of body, elbows straight and palms pressing down into mat. Feel mild tension through upper arms and shoulders. Hold 30 seconds.



Before starting any activity program, be sure to talk to your doctor or other healthcare professional.

This physical activity column was written by a Certified Personal Trainer Professional and Fitness Instructor and reviewed by a specialist in kinesiology.