

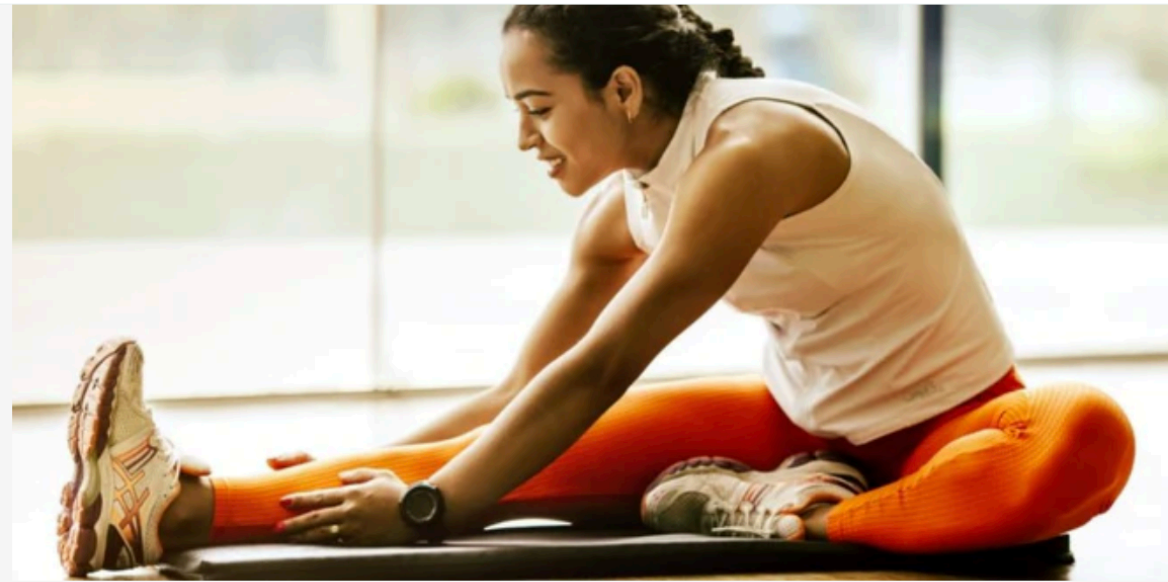


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FEATURED

# 12 Benefits of Stretching and How to Get Started

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Let's do an experiment.

First, close your eyes, take a few deep breaths, and do a mental scan of your body. Notice if and where you feel any tightness, discomfort, or pain. Make a note of it.

Next, over the course of a typical day, clock how much time you spend sitting, whether at a desk, in a car, on a train, eating, in front of the television, etc. Write down how many hours you spend in a seated position throughout a full day.

Our bodies are meant to move, yet most of us are way too sedentary. Sitting all day wreaks havoc on our body. It is hard on our hip flexors and spine and weakens our core and glute muscles. Studies have shown that long periods of sitting are linked to a decrease in overall health.

Have you ever noticed how your body feels after sitting for extended periods, or when you get out of bed in the morning? Perhaps a little stiff, achy, or older than your years?

Lack of stretching can lead to tight or pulled muscles, and even long-term muscle damage. Muscles that have been warmed up before any exercise are better able to withstand the exertion.

The good news? You don't have to be a yogi or a ballerina to start stretching.

You can use stretching to feel good or pre- and post-exercise.

Wonder how to stay mobile? Stretch.

Whether you are a newbie or a seasoned athlete, incorporating a daily stretching routine into your life can work wonders and has many positive health benefits.

## 12 BENEFITS OF STRETCHING

1. Increases flexibility and improves mobility
2. May reduce risk of injury including strains, tears, joint pain, and muscle damage
3. Improves performance in physical activities
4. Helps joints move through their full range of motion
5. Enables muscles to work most effectively
6. Promotes circulation
7. Improves balance to help avoid falls
8. Improves posture
9. Decreases muscle stiffness and back pain, allowing muscles to stay long, lean, and flexible
10. Reduces post-exercise muscle aches and pains
11. Helps manage or reduce stress and increase a sense of well-being
12. Counteracts the impact of sitting for too long

### HOW TO BEGIN YOUR STRETCHING ROUTINE

The beauty of stretching is that it is easy to do at any time, and anywhere. You can even do stretches at your desk, standing in line at the supermarket, or waiting for a bus or train.

Start where you are and be gentle with yourself. Remember, to reap the full benefits of stretching and to notice any real difference takes time and consistency.

Every stretch can always be modified. Listen to your body. You may feel tension during a stretch, but you should not feel pain. If you do, there may be an injury or damage in the tissue. Stop stretching that muscle and speak with your doctor before proceeding.

Just 5 to 10 minutes of daily stretching is all you need to begin creating a new habit.

## BEST BEGINNING STRETCHES

While there is no shortage of stretches that you can do for every part of your body, here are some of the best stretches to start with.

Remember to never bounce while stretching; this can cause injury.

## NECK STRETCH SERIES

This series can be done every day... even at your desk or while watching television.

The stretches will help release tension and reduce neck pain, gain flexibility, prevent problems with your shoulders, upper back, and arms.

Remember to breathe while doing these movements. That means to inhale and exhale as fully as possible.



## Forward and Backward Tilt

You can do this seated or standing. Start with your head squarely over your shoulders and your back straight.

- Lower your chin toward your chest and hold for 15-30 seconds. Relax, and slowly lift your head back up.
- Slowly tilt your chin up toward the ceiling and bring the base of your skull toward your back. Hold for 10 seconds, then return to the start position.
- Repeat several times.

## Side Stretch

If seated, let your arms hang relaxed by your side. If standing, have your feet hip-width apart and arms down by your side.

- Gently tilt your head toward your right shoulder. Try to touch it with your ear. Stop when you feel the stretch. Keep your shoulders down, away from your ears.
- Hold the stretch for 5-10 seconds, then return to the start position.
- Repeat on your left side. You can do several sets and work your way up to 10 repetitions.
- For an extra stretch, put the hand on the same side of your tilted head on top of your head, and gently press with your fingertips.

## Side Rotation

You can do this seated or standing. Remember to fully inhale and exhale while doing the movements.

- Keep your head squarely over your shoulders and your back straight.
- Slowly and very gently turn your head to the right until you feel a stretch in the side of your neck and shoulder.
- Hold the stretch for 15-30 seconds, and then slowly turn your head forward again.
- Repeat on your left side. Do up to 10 sets.

## Shoulder Roll

This is best done standing up.

- Raise your shoulders straight up and move them in a circle going forward. Do it 6 times.
- Return to the start position, and make another 6 circles, this time going backward.

## QUAD STRETCHES

Your quadriceps are the large muscles on the front of your thigh. To gain and maintain quad flexibility, try these exercises. Don't forget to breathe through them.



## Kneeling Stretch

You can use a soft cushion or pillow under the knee for more comfort.

- Kneel on your right knee and curve your pelvis under like a “scared dog.”
- Flatten out your lower back and keep shoulders and chest upright.
- Bend forward from the hip to the knee even more to stretch the right hip and quad.
- Hold for 30 seconds and then switch knees.

### Standing Stretch

- Stand on your left foot and grab your right shin by bending your leg behind you.
- Tuck your pelvis in, pull your shin toward your glutes, making sure your knee is pointing to the ground. Try not to pull the knee backward or sideways.
- Hold for 30 seconds and then switch sides.

### Lying Down Stretch

- Lie on your back at the corner of your bed (where it is the firmest), making sure that your tailbone is at the edge of the bed.
- Grab one thigh and pull it toward your chest. Make sure that your back is flat and not arched. Let gravity pull down on the leg that is dangling.
- Relax into the stretch so as not to tense up the muscles. Hold for 1 to 2 minutes and then switch sides.

### Butterfly Inner Thigh Stretch (AKA 'Cobbler Pose')

- Sit on your butt with your back straight
- Bring your feet together so the bottoms are touching, and your knees fall out to the sides
- Hold your feet together with your hands and actively reach your thighs towards the ground
- Slowly lean forward with as straight a back as possible to get a deeper stretch. Hold for 20 seconds

### Seated Forward Fold for Hamstring & Lower Back Stretch

- Sit with your legs extended straight in front of you
- Begin to bend forward at the hips
- Grab your toes, shins, or thighs and fold forward as you reach toward your toes
- Flex your feet and feel the stretch behind your legs.
- Hold for 20 seconds and breathe



## Figure Four Hip & Butt Stretch

This stretches the outsides of your hips and butt muscles. It targets the gluteus medius, which aids in hip movement and mobility and stabilizes the hip joint.

- Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor
- Cross your left foot over your right knee
- Grab your right leg behind the thigh and pull your right knee in toward your upper body until you feel a deep stretch in the left side of your hip
- Hold for 30 seconds as you breathe slowly and deeply
- Return to the starting position and switch sides

## **DOWNWARD FACING DOG**

This full-body stretch can be challenging for beginners but with practice you will see improvements. It can help relieve chronic pain caused by sitting.

This yoga posture has many benefits including:

- Stretches the lower body including hamstrings, calves, and ankles.
- Strengthens the upper body
- Stimulates blood flow because it places your heart above your head
- Improves posture by opening the chest and shoulders
- Fine-tunes your foot muscles by stretching and strengthening the major muscles and bones in your body and the smaller muscles in your feet



## How To Do Downward Facing Dog

- Start off on all fours and make sure your knees are slightly behind your hips. Your hands should be shoulder-width apart. Spread your fingers
- Press your hands into the floor or mat and gently tuck your toes under
- Take a deep inhale
- Keeping your hands pressed into the mat exhale deeply lifting your knees off the floor, pressing your hips back
- Straighten your legs as much as you can
- Your body should now resemble an upside-down “V” shape.
- Extend and lengthen your spine, simultaneously pressing through the palms of your hands and balls of your feet. Pull your pelvis up toward the ceiling, using the triceps in your upper arms to help stabilize your form.
- Hold for 30 seconds before releasing

## **STANDING FORWARD FOLD**

This yoga pose stretches and lengthens the hamstrings and calves and back muscles. It also stimulates digestive, nervous, and endocrine systems.



- Stand with your feet hip distance apart
- Inhale reaching your arms overhead
- Exhale and fold forward from your hips
- Slightly bend your knees so they are straight but not locked.
- Engage your quadriceps muscles and draw them up. The more you use your quads, the more the hamstrings will open.
- Bring your weight a little bit forward into the balls of your feet so that your hips stay over your ankles
- Let your head hang
- To come up, inhale and place your hands onto your hips. Press your tailbone down and contract your abdominal muscles as you rise slo

## Conclusion

After a couple of weeks of consistently practicing these stretches, close your eyes again, take a few deep breaths and scan your body. How does it feel as compared to before you started this stretching routine?

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