

Manage Your Health: One Step at a Time

How to Improve Your Flexibility

Stretching, or flexibility, exercises are an important part of your physical activity program. They give you more freedom of movement for your physical activities and for everyday activities such as getting dressed and reaching objects on a shelf. Stretching exercises can improve your flexibility but will not improve your endurance or strength.



How Much, How Often

- Do each stretching exercise 3 to 5 times at each session.
- Slowly stretch into the desired position, as far as possible without pain, and hold the stretch for 10 to 30 seconds. Relax, breathe, then repeat, trying to stretch farther.

Safety

- Talk with your doctor if you are unsure about a particular exercise. For example, if you've had hip or back surgery, talk with your doctor before doing lower-body exercises.
- Always warm up before stretching exercises. Stretch after endurance or strength exercises. If you are doing only stretching exercises, warm up with a few minutes of easy walking first. Stretching your muscles before they are warmed up may result in injury.
- Always remember to breathe normally while holding a stretch.
- Stretching may feel slightly uncomfortable; for example, a mild pulling feeling is normal.
- You are stretching too far if you feel sharp or stabbing pain, or joint pain — while doing the stretch or even the next day. Reduce the stretch so that it doesn't hurt.
- Never "bounce" into a stretch. Make slow, steady movements instead. Jerking into position can cause muscles to tighten, possibly causing injury.
- Avoid "locking" your joints. Straighten your arms and legs when you stretch them, but don't hold them tightly in a straight position. Your joints should always be slightly bent while stretching.

Progressing

- You can progress in your stretching exercises. For example, as you become more flexible, try reaching farther, but not so far that it hurts.

Neck

This easy stretch can help relieve tension in your neck. Try to stretch after strength training and during any activity that makes you feel stiff, such as sitting at a desk.

1. You can do this stretch while standing or sitting in a sturdy chair.
2. Keep your feet flat on the floor, shoulder-width apart.
3. Slowly turn your head to the right until you feel a slight stretch. Be careful not to tip or tilt your head forward or backward, but hold it in a comfortable position.
4. Hold the position for 10-30 seconds.
5. Turn your head to the left and hold the position for 10-30 seconds.
6. Repeat at least 3-5 times



Shoulder

This exercise to stretch your shoulder muscles will help improve your posture.

1. Stand back against a wall, feet shoulder-width apart and arms at shoulder height.
2. Bend your elbows so your fingertips point toward the ceiling and touch the wall behind you. Stop when you feel a stretch or slight discomfort, and stop immediately if you feel sharp pain.
3. Hold position for 10-30 seconds.
4. Let your arms slowly roll forward, remaining bent at the elbows, to point toward the floor and touch the wall again, if possible. Stop when you feel a stretch or slight discomfort.
5. Hold position for 10-30 seconds.
6. Alternate pointing above head, then toward hips.
7. Repeat at least 3-5 times.



Shoulder and Upper Arm

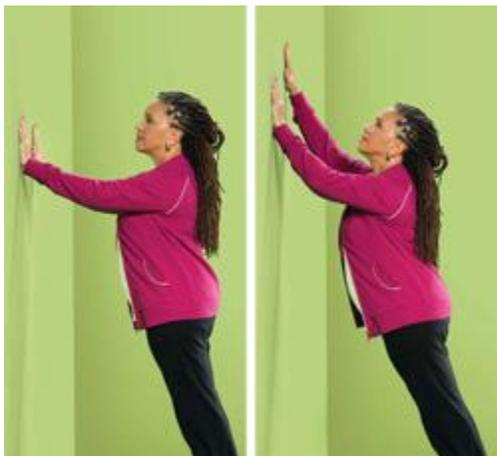
This exercise to increase flexibility in your shoulders and upper arms will help make it easier to reach for your seatbelt. If you have shoulder problems, talk with your doctor before trying this stretch.



1. Stand with feet shoulder-width apart.
2. Hold one end of a towel in your right hand.
3. Raise and bend your right arm to drape the towel down your back. Keep your right arm in this position and continue holding on to the towel.
4. Reach behind your lower back and grasp the towel with your left hand.
5. To stretch your right shoulder, pull the towel down with your left hand. Stop when you feel a stretch or slight discomfort in your right shoulder.
6. Repeat at least 3-5 times.
7. Reverse positions, and repeat at least 3-5 times.

Upper Body

This exercise increases the flexibility of your arms, chest, and shoulders, and will help you reach items on the upper shelves of your closet or kitchen cabinet.



1. Stand facing a wall slightly farther than arm's length from the wall, feet shoulder-width apart.
2. Lean your body forward and put your palms flat against the wall at shoulder height and shoulder-width apart.
3. Keeping your back straight, slowly walk your hands up the wall until your arms are above your head.
4. Hold your arms overhead for about 10-30 seconds.
5. Slowly walk your hands back down.
6. Repeat at least 3-5 times.

TIP: As you progress, the goal is to reach higher.

Chest

This exercise, which stretches the chest muscles, is also good for your posture.



1. You can do this stretch while standing or sitting in a sturdy, armless chair.
2. Keep your feet flat on the floor, shoulder-width apart.
3. Hold arms to your sides at shoulder height, with palms facing forward.
4. Slowly move your arms back, while squeezing your shoulder blades together. Stop when you feel a stretch or slight discomfort.
5. Hold the position for 10-30 seconds.
6. Repeat at least 3-5 times.

Back 1

This exercise is for your back muscles. If you've had hip or back surgery, talk with your doctor before trying this stretch.



1. Sit securely toward the front of a sturdy, armless chair with your feet flat on the floor, shoulder-width apart.
2. Slowly bend forward from your hips. Keep your back and neck straight.
3. Slightly relax your neck and lower your chin. Slowly bend farther forward and slide your hands down your legs toward your shins. Stop when you feel a stretch or slight discomfort.
4. Hold for 10-30 seconds.
5. Straighten up slowly all the way to the starting position.
6. Repeat at least 3-5 times.

TIP: As you progress, bend as far forward as you can and eventually touch your heels.

Back 2

This exercise will help you do activities that require you to twist or turn to look behind you, such as backing out of a parking space or swinging a golf club. If you've had hip or back surgery, talk with your doctor before trying this stretch.



1. Sit up toward the front of a sturdy chair with armrests. Stay as straight as possible. Keep your feet flat on the floor, shoulder-width apart.
2. Slowly twist to the left from your waist without moving your hips. Turn your head to the left. Lift your left hand and hold on to the left arm of the chair. Place your right hand on the outside of your left thigh. Twist farther, if possible.
3. Hold the position for 10-30 seconds.
4. Slowly return to face forward.
5. Repeat on the right side.
6. Repeat at least 3-5 more times.

TIP: As you progress, try lifting your left arm and resting it comfortably on the back of the chair. Hold on to the left armrest with your right arm. Repeat on right side.

Upper Back

This exercise is good for your shoulders and upper-back muscles.



1. Sit in a sturdy, armless chair with your feet flat on the floor, shoulder-width apart.
2. Hold arms in front of you at shoulder height with palms facing outward.
3. Relax your shoulders, keep your upper body still, and reach forward with your hands. Stop when you feel a stretch or slight discomfort.
4. Hold position for 10-30 seconds.
5. Sit back up.
6. Repeat at least 3-5 times.

TIP: As you progress, cross your arms and interlace fingers.

Ankle

This exercise stretches your ankle muscles. You can stretch both ankles at once or one at a time.



1. Sit securely toward the edge of a sturdy, armless chair.
2. Stretch your legs out in front of you.
3. With your heels on the floor, bend your ankles to point toes toward you.
4. Hold the position for 10-30 seconds.
5. Bend ankles to point toes away from you and hold for 10-30 seconds.
6. Repeat at least 3-5 times.

About Floor Exercises

To Get Down on the Floor:

1. Stand facing the seat of a sturdy chair.
2. Put your hands on the seat, and lower yourself down on one knee.
3. Bring the other knee down.
4. Put your left hand on the floor. Leaning on your hand, slowly bring your left hip to the floor. Put your right hand on the floor next to your left hand to steady yourself, if needed.
5. You should now be sitting with your weight on your left hip.
6. Straighten your legs.
7. Bend your left elbow until your weight is resting on it. Using your right hand as needed for support, straighten your left arm. You should now be lying on your left side.
8. Roll onto your back

TIP: If you have trouble getting down on or up from the floor by yourself, try using the buddy system. Find someone who will be able to help you. Knowing how to use a chair to get down on the floor and get back up again also may be helpful. If you've had hip or back surgery, talk with your doctor before using the following method.

To Get Up from the Floor:

1. Roll onto your left side.
2. Place your right hand on the floor at about the level of your ribs and use it to push your shoulders off the floor. Use your left hand to help lift you up, as needed.
3. You should now be sitting with your weight on your left hip.
4. Roll forward, onto your knees, leaning on your hands for support.
5. Reach up and lean your hands on the seat of a sturdy chair.
6. Lift one of your knees so that one leg is bent, foot flat on the floor.
7. Leaning your hands on the seat of the chair for support, rise from this position.

TIP: You don't have to use your left side. You can use your right side, if you prefer.

Back of Leg (Floor)

This exercise stretches the muscles in the back of your legs. If you've had hip or back surgery, talk with your doctor before trying this stretch. (See About Floor Exercises.)



1. Lie on your back with left knee bent and left foot flat on the floor.
2. Raise right leg, keeping knee slightly bent.
3. Reach up and grasp right leg with both hands. Keep head and shoulders flat on the floor.
4. Gently pull right leg toward your body until you feel a stretch in the back of your leg.
5. Hold position for 10-30 seconds.
6. Repeat at least 3-5 times.
7. Repeat at least 3-5 times with left leg.

Back of Leg

Here's another exercise that stretches the muscles in the back of your legs. If you've had hip or back surgery, talk with your doctor before trying this stretch.



1. Sit sideways on a bench or other hard surface, such as two chairs placed together.
2. Keeping back straight, stretch one leg out on the bench, toes pointing up.
3. Keep other foot flat on the floor.
4. If you feel a stretch at this point, hold position for 10-30 seconds.
5. If you don't feel a stretch, lean forward from hips (not waist) until you feel stretching in the leg on the bench.
6. Hold position for 10-30 seconds.
7. Repeat at least 3-5 times.
8. Repeat at least 3-5 times with your other leg.

Thigh (Floor)

This exercise stretches your thigh muscles. If you've had hip or back surgery, talk with your doctor before trying this stretch. If you have trouble getting down on the floor or back up again, try the Thigh Standing stretch. (See About Floor Exercises.)



1. Lie on your side with legs straight and knees together.
2. Rest your head on your arm.
3. Bend top knee and reach back and grab the top of your foot. If you can't reach your foot, loop a resistance band, belt, or towel over your foot and hold both ends.
4. Gently pull your leg until you feel a stretch in your thigh.
5. Hold position for 10-30 seconds.
6. Repeat at least 3-5 times.
7. Repeat at least 3-5 times with your other leg.

Thigh (Standing)

Here's another exercise that stretches your thigh muscles. If you've had hip or back surgery, talk with your doctor before trying this stretch.



1. Stand behind a sturdy chair with your feet shoulder-width apart and your knees straight, but not locked.
2. Hold on to the chair for balance with your right hand.
3. Bend your left leg back and grab your foot in your left hand. Keep your knee pointed to the floor. If you can't grab your ankle, loop a resistance band, belt, or towel around your foot and hold both ends.
4. Gently pull your leg until you feel a stretch in your thigh.
5. Hold position for 10-30 seconds.
6. Repeat at least 3-5 times.
7. Repeat at least 3-5 times with your right leg.

Hip

This exercise will stretch your hip and inner thigh muscles. If you've had hip or back surgery, talk with your doctor before trying this stretch. (See About Floor Exercises.)



1. Lie on your back with your legs together, knees bent, and feet flat on the floor. Try to keep both shoulders on the floor throughout the stretch.
2. Slowly lower one knee as far as you comfortably can. Keep your feet close together and try not to move the other leg.
3. Hold position for 10-30 seconds.
4. Bring knee back up slowly.
5. Repeat at least 3-5 times.
6. Repeat at least 3-5 times with your other leg.

Lower Back

This exercise stretches the muscles of your lower back. If you've had hip or back surgery, talk with your doctor before trying this stretch. (See About Floor Exercises.)



1. Lie on your back with your legs together, knees bent, and feet flat on the floor. Try to keep both arms and shoulders flat on the floor throughout the stretch.
2. Keeping knees bent and together, slowly lower both legs to one side as far as you comfortably can.
3. Hold position for 10-30 seconds.
4. Bring legs back up slowly and repeat toward other side.
5. Continue alternating sides for at least 3-5 times on each side.

Calf

Because many people have tight calf muscles, it's important to stretch them.



1. Stand facing a wall slightly farther than arm's length from the wall, feet shoulder-width apart.
2. Put your palms flat against the wall at shoulder height and shoulder-width apart.
3. Step forward with right leg and bend right knee. Keeping both feet flat on the floor, bend left knee slightly until you feel a stretch in your left calf muscle. It shouldn't feel uncomfortable. If you don't feel a stretch, bend your right knee until you do.
4. Hold position for 10-30 seconds, and then return to starting position.
5. Repeat with left leg.
6. Continue alternating legs for at least 3-5 times on each leg.

Buddy Stretch

This is a good over-all stretch that's fun to do with a partner. It stretches your shoulders, arms, back, and legs. If you've had hip or back surgery, talk with your doctor before trying this stretch. (See Working with a Resistance Band and About Floor Exercises above.)



1. Sit on the floor facing your buddy and place your feet against your partner's feet.
2. Both of you should grab one end of a resistance band or towel. Depending on each person's flexibility, you may need to loop two bands or towels together.
3. Slowly pull the band or towel so that your buddy bends forward and you lean backward.
4. Hold position for 10-30 seconds.
5. Slowly return to starting position.
6. Now it's your buddy's turn to pull the band or towel so that you bend forward and your buddy leans backward. Hold for 10-30 seconds, and then return to starting position.
7. Repeat at least 3-5 times.

TIP: As you progress, try holding the band so that your hands are closer to your buddy's, or try using a heavier strength band. Some people may be able to do the stretch by reaching out and holding hands during the stretch.

Source: Chapter 4, *Exercise & Physical Activity: Your Everyday Guide from the National Institute on Aging*. http://www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation/Publications/ExerciseGuide/04e_flexibility.htm