

Proper Stretching

Muscle Stretches for Your Lower Body

When doing most of your hamstring stretches, you can also stretch the calf muscles.

True hamstring muscle stretches are done with a straight leg, with a nearly locked knee. Simply dorsiflex the foot, bring the toes toward your shin, and you have two stretches at one time.

You'll maintain good calf flexibility while doing your hamstring stretches.

Overpronation and other factors damage the Achilles tendon, but a FULLY stretched pair of calf muscles, gastrocnemius and soleus, is your first line of defense against damage to the Achilles tendon, the muscles, or that all important muscle tendon unit.

A good stretching routine is the key to Flexibility. Make stretching a regular habit, and you will maintain as much flexibility as your body design is capable of.

Quadriceps Stretch: The quadriceps is the muscle in the front of the thigh, important for lifting your knees. It is the "quads" that often go at the end of marathons, causing runners to come shuffling across the finish line because they have a hard time lifting their feet off the ground. To do this exercise while standing, simply grab hold of a stationary object for balance with one hand and use the opposite hand to grasp the leg around the ankle, lifting it toward your buttocks. You want to keep your back straight and not allow the knee to drift forward ahead of the stance leg. A lot of people slouch forward, which effectively negates the stretch's effectiveness.

An even more effective way to do this exercise, however, is lying on a bench, using a towel wrapped around the ankle to pull your foot toward your buttocks. You should position yourself on the edge of the bench with the foot of your dangling leg forward, knee bent, leg relaxed. As with the other stretching exercises, hold each stretch for 10 seconds and repeat as many as 10 times for each leg.

Hamstring Stretch: Most runners do this exercise by putting their foot on a waist-high stationary object (or a hurdle if at the track) and slowly leaning forward, reaching down the shin until they feel a stretch in the hamstring. The hamstring is the muscle that runs from just below the knee up into the buttocks. It's the muscle that lifts the lower leg and bends the knee after the quads have lifted your knees. Straining your hamstring can limit your ability to walk. The best way to do this exercise, however, is not with your foot on a stool, but rather while lying on your back. Lie on your back, keeping the back flat and your eyes focused upward. Grasp the back of one thigh with both your hands and (leg bent) pull that thigh into a 90-degree position vs. the floor. Then slowly straighten your knee. After you've gotten used to doing this exercise, you can achieve a better stretch by pulling your thigh closer to your chest—but don't overdo it!

Piriformis Stretch: The piriformis muscle is responsible for lateral rotation of the hip. It is particularly important when on uneven surfaces when you have to change direction. Keeping the piriformis muscle loose is important for overall flexibility. Lying on your back, cross your legs just as you might while sitting in a chair. Grasping the "under" leg with both hands, pull the knee toward your chest until you feel the stretch in your buttocks and hips.

Gastroc Stretch: This push-off exercise is the one you most often see runners doing before races. Typically, they lean against a wall to stretch the calf muscles—but they don't always do it right. Lean against a wall or other stationary object, both palms against the object. The leg you want to stretch is back, several feet from the wall, your heel firmly positioned on the floor. Your other leg is flexed about halfway between your back leg and the wall. Start with your back straight and gradually lunge forward until you feel the stretch in your calf. It is important to keep your back foot straight and angled 90 degrees from the wall.

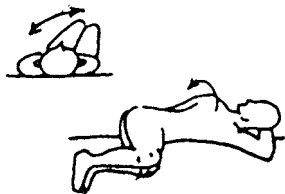
Soleus Stretch: This is the stretch that most people forget, they stretch their gastroc muscles (as above) without realizing there's a similar stretch for the soleus. The soleus is the other major muscle in the calf, located in front of the gastroc. It is important for planting the foot on the ground before your push off. Position yourself similar to the gastroc stretch with back straight and palms against the wall. The difference is that you start in a "seated" position with your legs bent, your buttocks dropped. Gently lean into the wall until you feel the stretch in your lower calf.

Muscle Stretches for Your Upper Body

The following exercises are designed to increase your flexibility. Stretch to the point of a gentle stretch and hold it, without bouncing. The stretches can be performed all at once or spread throughout the day. You should stretch at least 5 days a week. **DISCONTINUE AN EXERCISE IF IT IS PAINFUL.**



Double Knee to Chest



Rotation

LOWER BACK

Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet resting on the floor.

With your hands, pull one knee to your chest, then pull the other until you feel a gentle stretch in the lower back.

Hold 10 counts, then put one leg down at a time.

Do 10-15 repetitions

Lie on your back with your knees bent slightly and feet resting on the floor.

Keeping your shoulders on the floor, slowly drop your knees to one side, until you feel a gentle stretch in the lower back.

Hold 10 counts, then bring your knees back to the center before repeating the stretch.

Do 10-15 repetitions to each side.

Progression — As the stretch becomes easier, try to bend the knees more when stretching.



Extension

ABDOMINALS

Lie on your stomach and prop up on your elbows until you feel a gentle stretch along your stomach muscles.

Hold 10 counts, then relax.

Do 10-15 repetitions.

IF THIS IS PAINFUL, TRY LYING FLAT ON YOUR STOMACH, INSTEAD.

Progression — As the stretch becomes easier, try to slowly straighten your elbows to increase the stretch. You can also try studying in the above position.



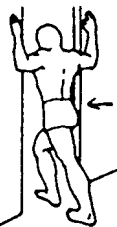
Lateral Trunk Flexors
— Side Bends

Sit or stand with your feet shoulder-width apart and a normal curve in the low back, midback and neck.

Slowly bend to one side until you feel a gentle stretch along the other side of your body.

Hold 10 counts, then relax.

Do 10-15 repetitions to each side.



Doorway Stretch

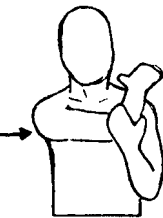
PECTORALS

Stand with one foot in front of the other and a normal curve in your low back, midback and neck. Bend your elbows to 90° and place your forearm(s) on the doorway wall(s).

Slowly shift your weight to your lead leg until you feel a gentle stretch in the chest muscles.

Hold 10 counts, then relax.

Do 10-15 repetitions to each side.



Shoulder Blade Hug

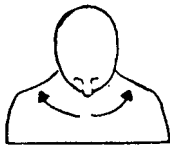
DELTOIDS

Stand or sit with a normal curve in the low back, midback and neck.

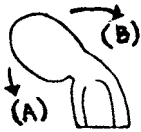
Grab your elbow with the opposite hand and pull it straight across your chest until you feel a gentle stretch in the back of the shoulder.

Hold 10 counts, then relax.

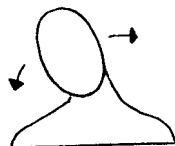
Do 10-15 repetitions to each side.



Flexion/Rotation



(A & B) Flexion/Extension



Lateral Side Bends

NECK

Slowly tuck your chin in to your chest.

Keeping the chin tucked, slowly rotate your head toward one shoulder until you feel a gentle stretch in the neck muscles.

Hold 10 counts, then relax.

Do 10-15 repetitions to each side.

(A) Slowly tuck your chin in to your chest until you feel a gentle stretch in the muscles along the back of your neck.

Hold 10 counts, then relax.

Do 10-15 repetitions.

(B) Keeping your mouth closed and leading with the chin, slowly tilt your head back until you feel a gentle stretch in the muscles along the front of your neck.

Hold 10 counts, then relax.

Do 10-15 repetitions.

Keeping your head in line with your shoulders, slowly bend your neck to the side until you feel a gentle stretch along the opposite side of your neck.

Hold 10 counts, then relax.

Do 10-15 repetitions to each side.