



## Stretching Essentials

Ready, set, stretch!

- **Target major muscle groups.** When you're stretching, focus on your calves, thighs, hips, lower back, neck and shoulders. Also stretch muscles and joints that you routinely use at work or play.
- **Warm up first.** Stretching muscles when they're cold increases your risk of injury, including pulled muscles. Warm up by walking while gently pumping your arms, or do a favorite exercise at low intensity for five minutes. Better yet, stretch after you exercise — when your muscles are warm and more receptive to stretching. If you plan to stretch only after your workout, increase the intensity of the activity more slowly than you would if you had stretched your muscles before exercising.
- **Hold each stretch for at least 30 seconds.** It takes time to lengthen tissues safely. Hold your stretches for at least 30 seconds — and up to 60 seconds for a really tight muscle or problem area. That can seem like a long time, so keep an eye on the clock or your watch. Then repeat the stretch on the other side. For most muscle groups, a single stretch is often enough if you hold it long enough.
- **Don't bounce.** Bouncing as you stretch can cause small tears in the muscle. These tears leave scar tissue as the muscle heals, which tightens the muscle even further — making you less flexible and more prone to pain.
- **Focus on a pain-free stretch.** Expect to feel tension while you're stretching. If it hurts, you've gone too far. Back off to the point where you don't feel any pain, then hold the stretch.
- **Relax and breathe freely.** Don't hold your breath while you're stretching.

How often to stretch is up to you. As a general rule, stretch whenever you exercise. If you don't exercise regularly, you might want to stretch at least three times a week to maintain flexibility. If you have a problem area, such as tightness in the back of your leg, you might want to stretch every day or even twice a day.

You can stretch anytime, anywhere — in your home, at work or when you're traveling. If you have a chronic condition or an injury, however, you may need to alter your approach to stretching. For example, if you have a strained muscle, stretching it like usual may cause further harm. Discuss with your doctor or a physical therapist the best way to stretch.

**If you would like more information, please contact  
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