


your head-to-toe stretching guide

It's not just for the gym anymore: Doing daily, dynamic moves can relieve tension, prevent pain, limber you up, and help wind you down.

A woman with blonde hair tied in a bun is shown from the back, wearing a grey tank top. She is stretching her arms overhead, with her hands clasped together. The background is a dark, textured grey.

If you've ever watched a cat get up from a nap and do a few deep, leg-extending lunges while moving across the room, you've witnessed (believe it or not) the newest thinking in stretching. "Dynamic stretches—or active movements that take joints through a range of motion—can get blood flowing to your muscles, which helps them work better," says Jim Wharton, an exercise physiologist and a musculoskeletal therapist in New York City. Unlike the held movements of traditional stretching (which have not been shown to prevent injury and can actually weaken muscles), this new approach helps warm up muscles so they perform more efficiently, improves flexibility, teases out tension, and can even stop the onset of stress-induced pain. So whether your neck is knotted or your legs need loosening, enlist the targeted moves on these pages each day and you'll start feeling pretty dynamic, too.

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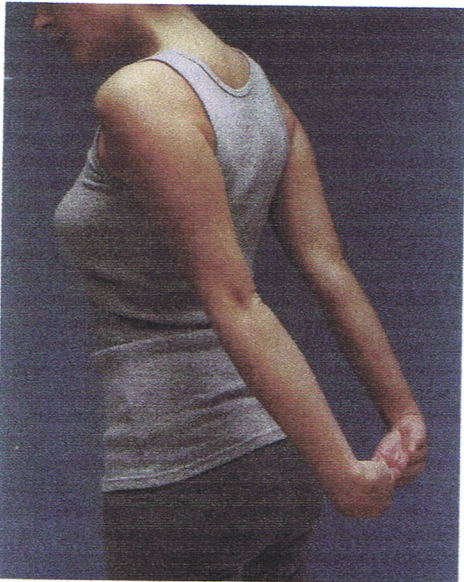


to stretch your entire upper body

Lift your left arm with the elbow locked and bring it across your chest toward your right shoulder. Keep your left shoulder down. Gently press your forearm with your right hand to increase the stretch. Pause for one count and release the arm to the starting position. Repeat 8 to 10 times on each side.

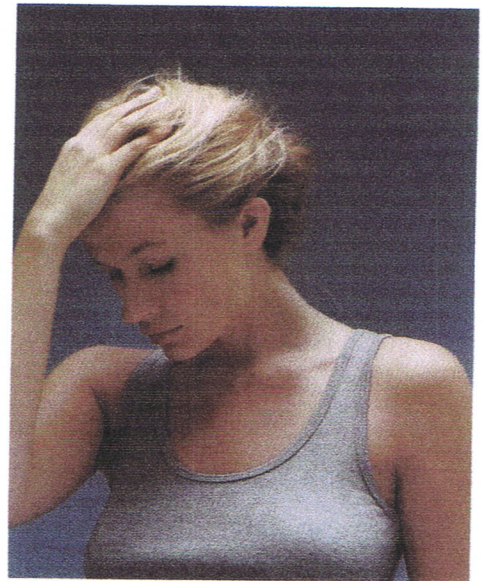
upper-body stretches

If you sit at a desk, log hours in a car, or spend time standing, your upper body needs to unwind—literally. “It’s important to reverse the hunched-over position you’re often in each day,” says Michael R. Bracko, an exercise physiologist in Calgary, Alberta. “Otherwise you’ll get muscle imbalances that can turn into chronic pain.” Stretches that open up the chest and the shoulders and elongate the neck can relieve this. (They also help counteract poor posture, and they feel great, too.) Use these moves whenever you sense stiffness and before upper-body activities, such as swimming, strength training, and tennis.



to target your chest and shoulders v

Stand with both arms straight out to the side at shoulder level. Turn palms faceup, with thumbs pointed behind you. Draw your arms back until you feel a stretch across your chest. Pause for one count, then release back to the starting position. Repeat 8 to 10 times.

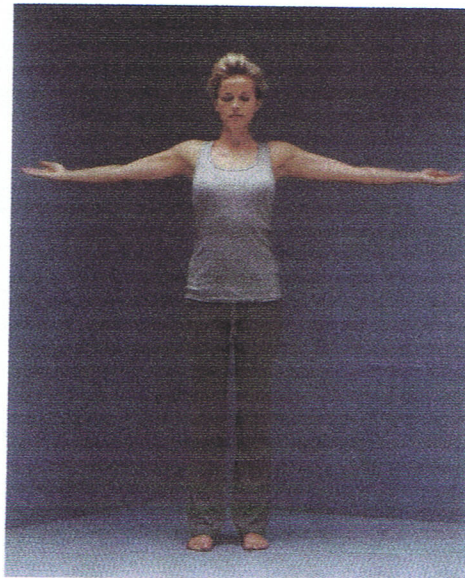


to relax your neck ^

Turn your head 45 degrees to the right and drop it forward (your right ear will move toward your chest). Place your right hand on top of your head and gently press down to assist the movement. Pause for one count, then return your head to the starting position. Repeat 8 to 10 times on each side.

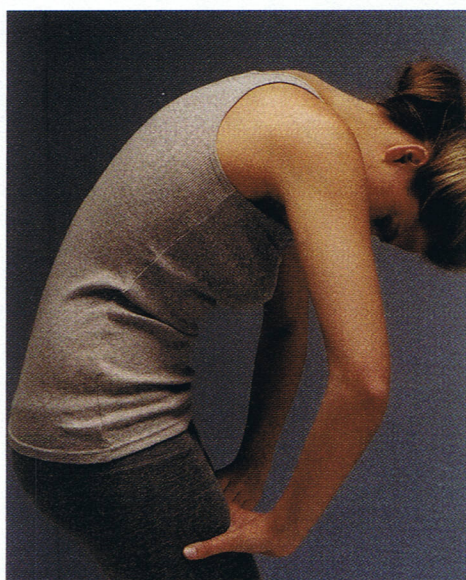
to loosen your shoulders ^

Stand with your arms down at your sides. Keeping your elbows locked and palms facing each other, raise your arms back and reach as high as you can behind you. Try to touch your fingers together. Pause for one count, then release. Repeat 8 to 10 times.



lower-body stretches

It's not just your neck and upper back that hold tension. Your lower back, hamstrings, calves, and feet can get chronically cramped, too. The muscles in these areas are responsible for large-scale movements (namely, walking, standing, and sitting down), and keeping them supple and limber will help you to move easily (and not feel like groaning every time you get up from a chair). The stretches shown here can provide everyday relief, prevent aches, or serve as warm-up moves for a workout, whether you're going for a run or using an elliptical trainer.



to release your lower back ^

Stand with your legs hip-width apart. Bend your knees slightly and place your hands on your thighs. Keep your head in a neutral position. Slowly round your back, dropping your chin downward. Then, just as slowly, arch your back. Repeat the full move 8 to 10 times.

to unkink your calves and feet v

Sit on the floor with your legs stretched straight out in front of you. Wrap a towel around your left foot. Flex your foot, bringing your toes toward your knee. Gently pull the towel to deepen the stretch for a count of one. Relax and repeat 8 to 10 times. Switch the towel to the other foot and repeat the sequence on that side. (This move also helps prevent foot pain, particularly the condition known as plantar fasciitis. For more information, see "Best Feet Forward," page 83.)



to extend your hamstrings ^

Stand, lightly holding on to the back of a chair. Bend your right knee 90 degrees and lift it in front of you to hip height. Place your right hand under your thigh and gently pull your knee toward your chest for a count of one. To help you balance, be sure to keep your standing leg soft and your abdominals contracted. Lower and repeat 8 to 10 times, then switch legs and complete 8 to 10 more reps.



to stretch your
entire lower body

Sit on the floor with your back straight, hands behind your head, elbows pointing out, and legs extended. Tuck your chin slightly and hold your abdominals in tight. Rotate your upper body as far to the left as you can (you'll feel a pull in your lower back). Repeat five times. On the last rep, flex your spine forward, moving your right elbow toward the floor. Pause for one count and repeat 8 to 10 times. Complete the entire series on the other side.

*Hair by James Mooney for Shu Uemura at Art-Department.
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