

Slide show: How to stretch your major muscle groups

By Mayo Clinic staff



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Stretching safely

Stretching is a powerful part of any exercise program. Stretching increases flexibility and improves range of motion of your joints. Stretching even improves circulation and helps relieve stress.

Before stretching, warm up with five to 10 minutes of light activity. Better yet, stretch after you exercise — when your muscles are warm and more receptive to stretching.

When you're stretching, keep it gentle. Breathe freely as you hold each stretch. Don't bounce. Expect to feel tension while you're stretching. If you feel pain, you've gone too far.



Calf stretch

Your calf muscle runs along the back of your lower leg. To stretch your calf muscles:

- Stand at arm's length from a wall or a piece of sturdy exercise equipment.
- Place your right foot behind your left foot.
- Slowly bend your left leg forward, keeping your right knee straight and your right heel on the floor.
- Hold the stretch for about 30 seconds, being careful to hold your back straight and your hips forward. Don't rotate your feet inward or outward.
- To deepen the stretch, slightly bend your right knee as you bend your left leg forward.
- Switch legs and repeat.



Hamstring stretch

Your hamstring muscle runs along the back of your upper leg. To stretch your hamstring muscles:

- Lie on the floor near the outer corner of a wall or a door frame.
- Raise your left leg and rest your left heel against the wall. Keep your left knee slightly bent.
- Gently straighten your left leg until you feel a stretch along the back of your left thigh.
- Hold the stretch for about 30 seconds.
- Switch legs and repeat.

As your flexibility increases, maximize the stretch by gradually scooting yourself closer to the wall or door frame.



Quadriceps stretch

Your quadriceps muscle runs along the front of your thigh. To stretch your quadriceps:

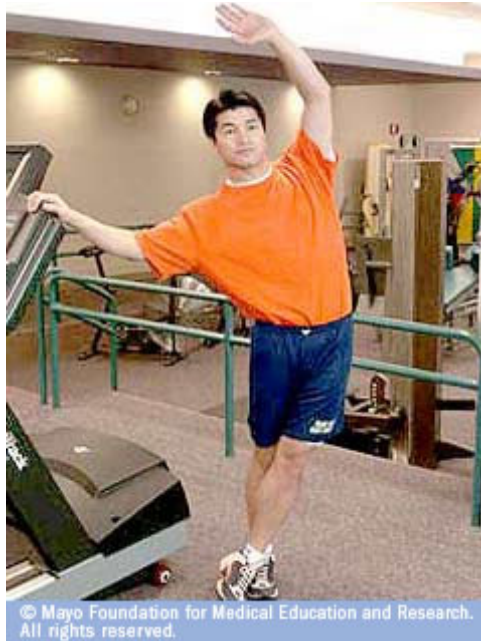
- Stand near a wall or a piece of sturdy exercise equipment for support.
- Grasp your ankle and gently pull your heel up and back until you feel a stretch in the front of your thigh.
- Tighten your stomach muscles to prevent your stomach from sagging outward, and keep your knees close together.
- Hold the stretch for about 30 seconds.
- Switch legs and repeat.



Hip flexor stretch

Your hip flexors — which allow you to lift your knees and bend at the waist — are located on your upper thighs, just below your hipbones. To stretch your hip flexors:

- Kneel on your right knee, cushioning your kneecap with a folded towel.
- Place your left foot in front of you, bending your knee and placing your left hand on your left leg for stability.
- Place your right hand on your right hip to avoid bending at the waist. Keep your back straight and abdominal muscles tight.
- Lean forward, shifting more body weight onto your front leg. You'll feel a stretch in your right thigh.
- Hold the stretch for about 30 seconds.
- Switch legs and repeat.



Iliotibial band (ITB) stretch

The iliotibial band (ITB) is a band of tissue that runs along the outside of your hip, thigh and knee. A tight ITB — a common problem for runners — may cause pain in the outer knee or hip. To stretch your ITB:

- Stand near a wall or a piece of sturdy exercise equipment for support.
- Cross your left leg over your right leg at the ankle.
- Extend your left arm overhead, reaching toward your right side. You'll feel a stretch along your left hip.
- Hold the stretch for about 30 seconds.
- Switch sides and repeat.

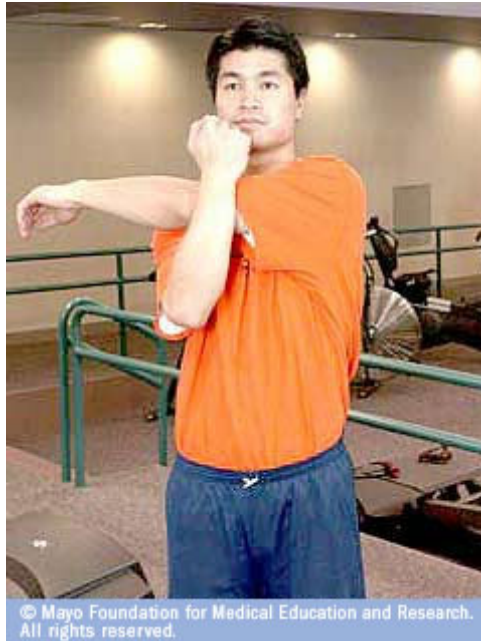


Knee-to-chest stretch

The knee-to-chest stretch emphasizes the muscles of your lower back. To do this stretch:

- Lie on your back on a firm surface with the backs of your heels flat on the floor.
- Gently pull one knee up to your chest until you feel a stretch in your lower back.
- Keep the opposite leg relaxed in a comfortable position, with your knee bent or with your leg extended as shown.
- Bring the knee as close to your chest as comfortably possible.
- Hold the stretch for about 30 seconds.
- Switch legs and repeat.

Avoid the knee-to-chest stretch if you have osteoporosis. You may increase the risk of compression fractures in your vertebrae.



Shoulder stretch

If the back of your shoulder is tight, you may be more likely to develop rotator cuff problems — especially if you golf or participate in overhead racket or throwing sports, such as tennis or baseball. To keep your shoulders flexible:

- Bring your left arm across your body and hold it with your right arm, either above or below the elbow.
- Hold the stretch for about 30 seconds.
- Switch arms and repeat.



Shoulder stretch with towel

Your shoulder's internal rotators are part of the group of muscles often used in overhead sports. To stretch these muscles:

- Grasp a rolled-up towel firmly with both hands, as shown.
- Gently pull the towel toward the ceiling with your top hand. You'll feel a stretch in the shoulder of your opposite arm as your lower hand is gently pulled farther up your back.
- Hold the stretch for about 30 seconds.
- Switch hands and repeat.



Neck stretch

To stretch your neck:

- Bend your head forward and slightly to the right.
- With your right hand, gently pull your head downward. You'll feel a nice, easy stretch along the back left side of your neck. Don't tug too hard. Remember, you want to hold a comfortable — not painful — stretch.
- Hold the stretch for about 30 seconds.
- Repeat on the opposite side.



Chest stretch

Stretching the muscles in your upper back can promote good posture. To stretch these muscles:

- Stand in a relaxed position with your arms extended in front of you, parallel to the floor (top).
- Pull your shoulder blades together behind you, bending your arms slightly at the elbows. You'll notice that your arms spread a little wider as you do this (bottom).
- Hold the position for a count of five, then relax as you return to the starting position.
- Repeat five to 10 times.