

Stretching Exercises

So far, we've focused on activities that burn calories and improve fitness. What about activities that increase flexibility, such as stretching exercises or yoga? Some athletes believe that doing stretching exercises before a workout reduces the risk of injury. So far, there's not much scientific evidence to support that idea. And stretching is not going to strengthen your heart and muscles. But that doesn't mean it's not important. We're convinced that stretching exercises help people stay active by keeping joints and muscles flexible. Obviously, maintaining the ability to reach and bend is important in everyday life.

With that in mind, we offer four easy stretching exercises you can do when you first wake up or between TV commercials.

Achilles Tendon and Calf Stretch

This exercise stretches the heel cord and the back of the lower leg. Stand 2 or 3 feet (61-91 cm) from a wall or tree with both toes pointed forward as you lean toward the wall with your left leg forward with knee slightly bent and your right leg in back and straight, partly supporting yourself with your hands. Keep both heels flat to stretch the calf. Hold 10 to 20 seconds, and repeat.

Hurdler Stretch

This exercise stretches the muscles of the back of the thigh. From a seated position bend your left knee and place the sole of left foot on the inside of your right knee (see photo). With your right knee very slightly bent, lean over your right leg, reaching toward your toes on your right foot. Keep your head and back straight as you move into the stretch. Hold 10 to 20 seconds, and repeat. Switch legs and repeat again.



Achilles tendon and calf stretch.



Hurdler stretch.



Modified quadriceps stretch.

Quadriceps Stretch

This exercise stretches the muscles of the front of the thigh. Place your left hand against a chair, wall, or tree for balance and then grab your right ankle with your right hand and pull it up and back toward your buttocks until you can feel a stretch in the front of your right thigh. Or you can simply bend your leg back and toward your buttocks (see photo). Keep your back straight and your right knee pointing toward the ground. The standing leg should have a slightly bent knee. Hold the stretch for 10 to 20 seconds, and repeat with the left leg.

Lower-Back Stretch

This exercise stretches the muscles of the lower back. Lie flat on the floor on your back with your legs extended, and pull the right knee up to your chest. Bend your left knee slightly and press your back to the ground. Hold the position 10 to 20 seconds, and repeat with the left knee.

Keep in mind that time spent on stretching exercises doesn't count toward meeting your activity goals. Still, these exercises are a great way to get ready for activity or to cool down afterward. They're also a great way to relax if you find yourself under stress.



Lower-back stretch.

The Yoga Option

Yoga is one of the oldest physical disciplines in the world. The age-old practice combines meditation, breathing exercises, and postures that are thought to focus physical and mental energy. Yoga has been shown to have many health benefits. These include reducing stress and anxiety and easing depression. Yoga is typically not an aerobic activity, so it

doesn't count toward meeting exercise recommendations for moderate activity. But some forms of yoga do improve muscle strength and flexibility and thus can help you stay active and healthy.

Yoga has been around for so long that a variety of forms have evolved:

- **Hatha yoga**—the traditional practice of postures designed to improve flexibility, balance, and strength while focusing the mind and body
- **Ashtanga yoga**—sometimes called *power yoga* because it emphasizes powerful movements that require strength and stamina
- **Iyengar yoga**—a combination of slow, controlled movements
- **Kundalini yoga**—rapid movements accompanied by meditation, chanting, and breathing exercises
- **Bikram yoga**—popularly known as *hot yoga* because it is performed in warm rooms in order to boost flexibility

Most practitioners combine several approaches. For information on yoga classes, check out your local fitness centers or community recreation programs. You'll also find useful information from the American Yoga Association at www.americanyogaassociation.org and from Yoga in Canada at www.yogadirectorycanada.com.