

## Stretching

Whilst many people know that stretching correctly strengthens your joints, helps prevent injury, returns muscles to their natural length and reduces 'next day' stiffness, it's often a neglected part of our exercise regime.

The Extra Mile has teamed up with leading sports injury specialists, Creation FX, to bring you the essential guide to basic lower body stretching.

- **Timing is important:** There is evidence to suggest that your muscles are better able to cope with stretches later in the day, since your blood has been flowing into them throughout the day.
- **Slow movements:** Always move into, and out of, your stretches slowly. Quick movements, jerking and bouncing all do more harm than good.
- **How long for?:** When warming up for exercise, you're advised to hold the stretch for about 10 - 12 seconds. Always do a gentle warm up jog or walk first as stretching cold muscles can cause injury. When stretching as part of a 'cool down', though, you need to stretch for longer - 30 seconds is about right for most people.
- **Breathe out:** Since breathing techniques can also develop your flexibility, take a deep breath in then, on exhaling, ease a little further into the desired stretch.
- **On all sides:** Where possible, alternate stretches to include both sides and both 'directions', medially (inwards) and laterally (outwards). Any of the following stretches can be used in isolation or as part of a sequence.

## **Exercises**

**Glutes/Bottom:** Place left leg across your right upper thigh; lift the right leg off the floor. Reach through the space between the legs and grasp the hamstring/rear of leg. Slowly and gently ease the leg towards your body. Alternate.

**Quadriceps:** Keep the knees together, hips pushed forward and maintain a good 'neutral' spine. Pull the heel towards your bottom. Note the alignment from the back through to upper leg. Be very careful to protect the knee joint; pull gently when performing this stretch, especially if you have a history of knee problems. Note the position of the foot pulling tight in to the bottom. Keep a soft bend in the 'standing' leg and, as before, push hips forward. Just varying the angle lets you stretch both the medial and lateral Quadriceps

**Gastrocnemius (Calf):** With the heel of your left foot still resting on the floor, position your left toes against a wall whilst keeping the leg straight. Gently reduce the distance between your hips and the wall. This stretch also hits the plantar flexors in the foot. Alternate.

**Laterally/medially rotated:** Start as before, with your foot placed 'up the wall'. Turn it away from the midline. Hold, then release. Repeat, but this time turn towards the midline. To target the soleus (deep calf muscle), bend the front leg a little and 'sit' into the stretch. The Soleus is the 'often forgotten' calf

muscle that frequently causes problems with the Achilles, if too tight. Start with a slight bend and increase until a mild discomfort is felt.

**Iliotibial Band (ITB):** Cross your right leg over the left, leaving a little room between your feet for extra stability. Flex the trunk of your body forward and reach round to gently grab the calf muscle. Repeat on the other side.

**Hamstrings:** Basic position (figure of four position): With your right leg extended and left leg bent, reach towards your toes whilst maintaining a good spine position. Repeat on the other leg. You'll feel a good stretch behind the knee and along the whole of the straight leg. Standing (with variations): Bend 'front' leg slightly, with most of the body weight passing through the rear, bent leg. Place hands on your thigh. Maintain a good 'neutral spine and pull the bottom up while easing your chest down. Move the angle of your foot, first medially, then laterally to hit all hamstring muscles (picture shows lateral).

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