

BACK FRIENDLY STRETCHES

To keep your legs and hips flexible, you need different stretches to work the various muscle groups. If you don't stretch regularly, these muscles get tight, which leads to leg, pelvis, and low-back pain. The following stretches help keep these muscles in good shape. Try them daily.

One Leg Up

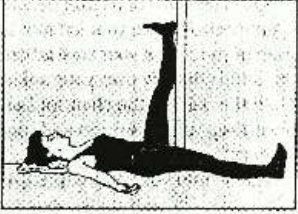


Figure 1. One leg up stretch.

This position stretches the hamstrings of one leg and the hip flexors of your other leg at the same time. Sit with your left side next to a door frame. Use your arms to support your body as you lie back. Place a rolled towel under your neck and a folded towel under your head. While keeping your left buttock against the wall, extend your left leg up the wall and bend your right leg keeping the foot on the floor. If you cannot completely straighten your left leg, or if your lower back is not resting solidly on the floor, move your buttocks away from the wall until you can straighten your leg while maintaining a comfortable but not painful hamstring stretch. Once your buttocks are properly positioned, slowly stretch out your right leg on the floor. If your lower back hurts with your right leg outstretched, place a rolled blanket behind your knee. Hold the stretch for 1 to 2 minutes. Repeat with your right leg up.

Wide-V Stretch

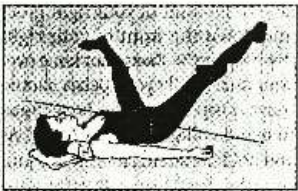


Figure 2. Wide-V stretch.

The wide-V works your inner thighs. First sit with one side to a wall, knees bent and feet on the floor. Using your arms for support, lie down on your side with your buttocks by the wall and your torso at right angles to the wall. While keeping your knees bent toward your chest, roll onto your back. Place a folded towel behind your head and a rolled towel behind your neck. Gradually straighten your legs, sliding your heels up the wall. If you can't comfortably straighten your

knees, or if your buttocks aren't on the floor, move away from the wall until you can straighten your knees. Let your legs slowly fall away from each other to form a "V". If you feel pain in the inner side of your knee, stretch with your heels as you aim your toes toward your head. If that doesn't work, bring your legs closer together. Find a position of comfortable stretch, and remain for 1 to 3 minutes, breathing quietly. To come out of this position, stretch your legs out through the heels as you push your legs back together with your hands. This avoids knee strain. Then bend your knees to your chest and roll onto your side before sitting.

Kneeling Lunge

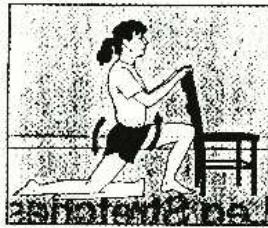


Figure 3. Kneeling lunge.

The kneeling lunge stretches the hips and the muscles that run next to your spine, while toning the abdominal muscles. This provides a bonus stretch for your back. Kneel on a pad behind a study chair. Place your left foot in front of you so that your knee is bent 90 degrees and is directly over your ankle. Hold the back of the chair for balance. Keep your torso erect and your arms centered near your shoulders. Take a deep breath. As you exhale, lift your pubic bone toward your breastbone and tuck your tailbone, so that you feel a stretch across the front of your right groin and down the front of your right thigh. Keep your knee over your ankle; only your pelvis should move. Keep lifting your breastbone to avoid collapsing your chest. As you hold the stretch for three to four breaths, focus on allowing your front thigh muscles to soften. Repeat with the right foot in front, feeling the stretch in your left thigh and groin. Do three to five sets.

The Pushover

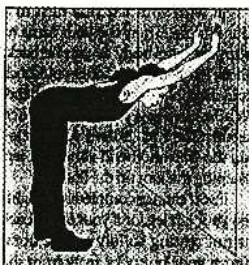


Figure 4. The pushover.

This stretch keeps your hamstrings flexible. Stand on a non-skid surface facing a bare wall, about a foot from it. Keep your feet parallel and 6 to 8 inches apart. Place your hands on the wall at shoulder height, shoulder width apart, with your fingers pointing up. While inhaling and pushing your hands into the wall, step back as you bend forward at the hips. Keep your back straight: Don't overarch or round it. The key is to bend from your hips and not from your waist. If this position causes hamstring or low-back pain, start over. This time begin with your hands on the wall at eye level. If this is still painful, try it with your hands even higher. If your shoulders are uncomfortable, place your hands wider apart. Don't let your elbows or knees go past straight. Hold them straight by pushing your hands into the wall and heels into the floor. Stay in the stretch 20 to 30 seconds, breathing easily. Keep your legs active by firmly pressing your heels into the floor. Visualize your spine lengthening. To stand, bend your knees slightly and step forward to bring your legs under your body. Repeat two to three times.

Warrior Stance



Figure 5. Warrior stance.

This exercise stretches the adductors and strengthens the spine-supporting muscles of the legs, buttocks, back and abdomen. Start by standing with your feet together and your back to a sturdy table or counter. Press your heels into the floor. While inhaling, spread your feet 4 to 5 feet apart until you feel stable, then exhale. You should feel stretch in your legs, but no pain. Keeping your spine erect and your legs straight, turn your left foot in slightly and your right foot out so that it is parallel to the table. Bend your right knee until it is exactly over the ankle and keep it there. If necessary, hold onto the table for support. Hold the stretch, keeping your left leg straight, for one to three breaths. Repeat the stretch on the left side. Start with one to three sets of this position for a few months. Then slowly build up to six sets. Gradually decrease your use of the table.