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Figures: Terry Boles

Warm Up With Back-Friendly Leg Stretches

As you move your thighs through their full range of motion, several major muscle groups are involved: Your hamstrings—the large muscles at the backs of your thighs—help stretch your thighs back. Your hip flexors, which run from your lower back to your upper thigh bone, help you lift your thigh forward and your hip adductors, which run along your inner thighs, help you pull your thighs together.

To keep your legs and hips flexible and in shape, therefore, you need to use different stretches to work the various groups. If you don't stretch regularly, these muscles can get tight, which can lead to leg, pelvis, or low-back pain and injury. The following stretches help keep these muscles in good shape. Try them before and after each workout.

One Leg Up

This position stretches the hamstrings of one leg and the hip flexors

of the other leg at the same time.

Sit with your left side next to a door frame. Then 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, not painful, hamstring stretch.

Once your buttocks are properly positioned, slowly stretch out your right leg (figure 1) on the floor. If your lower back hurts with your right leg outstretched, place a rolled blanket behind your knee. Hold the stretch one time for 1 to 2 minutes. Repeat with your right leg up.



Figure 1. One leg up stretch.

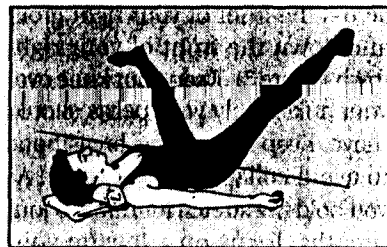


Figure 2. Wide-V stretch.

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" (figure 2). If you feel pain in the inner side of your knee, stretch out 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 rest there once for 1 to 2 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

The kneeling lunge stretches the hip flexors and the muscles that run

continued

Clip and copy for use as a patient handout.



For CME credit, see page 25

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parallel to your spine while toning the abdominal muscles. This provides a bonus stretch for your back.

Kneel on a pad or blanket behind a sturdy chair. Place your left foot in front of you so that your knee is bent 90° and is directly over your ankle. Hold the back of the chair for balance. Keep your torso erect and your ears centered over your shoulders.

Inhale into your entire torso. 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 (figure 3). 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

This stretch helps keep 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 in the position it is when you stand (figure 4): 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.

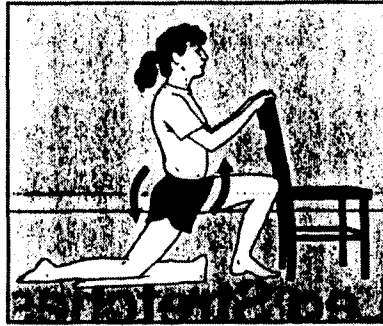


Figure 3. Kneeling lunge.



Figure 4. The pushover.



Figure 5. Warrior stance.

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.

Stand in the stretch 20 to 30 sec-

onds, 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. Stand quietly to relax your muscles. Repeat two to three times.

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 (figure 5).

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. **FSM**

Remember: This information is not intended as a substitute for medical treatment or for a complete fitness program. Before starting an exercise program, consult a physician.

Adapted from Back Care Basics: A Doctor's Gentle Yoga Program for Back and Neck Pain Relief, 1992, by Mary Pullig Schatz, MD, Berkeley, CA, Rodmell Press.