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## Does stretching make you more flexible

There are few things better than getting into a big, deep stretch. Stretching releases muscle tension, improves range of motion, and improves flexibility, which means your chance of injury decreases and you just feel better in everyday life. There are many different stretches you can incorporate into your daily routine, but if you're short on time or want to get the biggest bang for your time, there are several that target multiple muscle groups at a time. The moves below are easy to do, but if you are unsure about how to do them, take a minute to find a video of each stretch online so you know you're performing them correctly and you get the most out of your stretch. You'll notice, over time, that you'll be able to hold each position for longer, go deeper, and before long, see changes in your posture and movement. For each move, try holding for four to eight seconds and do them in succession five times, building from there. Reaching lower calf stretch This is a move you can start as a bent-over toe stretch and advance to placing your heel on the floor to target your calves more. To do this, stand with your feet close together, bending at the waist, and hang your arms toward the floor as far as they will go. Graduate to touching your toes and then placing your fingers under your toes, lifting up slightly. Once you've mastered the above, stand with your feet less than hip-width apart. Reach both hands toward the ceiling and step one foot in front of you. Place your outstretched heel on the ground and point your toe up. Keeping your toe up, bend your opposite knee and lower your hands so your fingertips meet your toes (or as close as you can get to your toes). Once you start to feel your calf muscle stretch, switch and repeat on your other leg. That's one rep. Koldunov/Shutterstock Runner's stretch This is an easy stretch that targets your hip flexors, quads, and hamstrings and is one many runners incorporate into their before-and-after-run routine. Keeping your left leg straight, bend your right knee so that your leg touches your chest. Hold this for a few seconds. Then, rotate your right leg until your knee is touching the ground in front of your left leg. Rotate your right arm, head, and upper back to the right until you feel a stretch. Do the same on the other side to complete one rep. You'll notice over time you can go deeper into your lunge and reach your arms further to each side. This one will also help you avoid injury if you spend time pounding the pavement. fizkes/Shutterstock Cobra stretch This is a stretch you can do before your feet even touch the floor in the morning. Lie on your stomach and place your hands flat beneath your shoulders (either in your bed or on the floor if you prefer a harder surface). Tuck your elbows in by your sides and raise your head and chest slowly, keeping your hips on the bed or floor. As you gain flexibility, you can begin to go a little deeper by lifting your stomach off the bed. Once you feel you've mastered the move, try grabbing your ankles behind you, keeping your arms straight, lift your ankles and chest, forming a "U" shape with your body. This is one you'll want to work up to and avoid altogether if you have a history of lower back pain or injury. Stretching not only helps your body improve but can also impact your mental well-being. Especially during the pandemic, many of us have been spending more time indoors than we ever remember. That feeling of being cooped up indoors or slouched over our laptops all day working from home can take a toll. Taking a few minutes every day to find movements that help us feel more limber can improve our outlook on the day and get rid of the aches and pains that come from being stationary. It gives us time to breathe and reflect on the day ahead. They are simple and take very little time out of your day, but you'll quickly notice an improvement in how your body feels. Editors' Recommendations Staying Healthy As you age, it's normal to become less limber. Your muscles shrink and your tendons lose their water content, which makes your body stiffer. But add in less activity from a sedentary lifestyle and your lack of flexibility can become even worse. "When you sit too much and don't move around, the muscles in your hips, legs, and calves get tighter," says Dr. Lauren Elson of the Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation Department at Harvard-affiliated Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital, and faculty editor for Harvard Health Publishing's special reports, Stretching and Starting to Exercise. This lack of flexibility can increase your risk of strains and other injuries, and add difficulty to everyday movements like reaching a high shelf, twisting to look behind you in the car, raising your arms overhead, walking up stairs, or squatting or bending to pick up something. The good news is that it's never too late to slow or even reverse the loss of flexibility. "You just need to approach your flexibility like any other aspect of your health," says Dr. Elson. The main trouble spots for people are the hips, legs, low back, and shoulders and chest. "These are the areas that you rely on most when performing routine movements, and the ones that suffer most when you're sedentary," says Dr. Elson. "Of course, everyone is different and you may have certain spots that are tighter than others." Stretching is the best way to improve flexibility. "You should stretch every day," says Dr. Elson. "It should be like brushing your teeth. Stretch after a workout or walk, after a hot shower, or as a break from a long period of sitting." Adopt a whole-body stretching program that targets all the major areas and moves your limbs through their full range of motion. (See "Stretch it out" for a sample beginner stretching routine.) "You can do a complete routine in about five to 10 minutes," says Dr. Elson. "You can even divide the stretches throughout the day." Supplementing your daily stretching with yoga, tai chi, or stretching classes at a community center can further improve flexibility. "They offer routines that may help you focus on your stiffest areas, especially the low back and hips," says Dr. Elson. Stretch it out This four-move stretching routine can help get you going to improve your flexibility. Stretch to the point of mild tension, with no bouncing. Your stretch should always feel good, so back out if you have any discomfort and don't try to push through it. Hold each stretch for about 10 to 30 seconds. Repeat the sequence described for each stretch two to four times. As always, see your doctor or a physical therapist if you experience any pain or discomfort while performing these or any other stretches, as this could be a sign of an injury or another problem. Downward dog Targets: back, hamstrings, calves Position yourself on all fours (hands and knees on the floor) with your hands shoulder-width apart, legs hip-width apart, and fingers extended. Exhale as you lift your knees off the floor, straightening your legs without locking the knees until you are in an upside-down V. Keep your neck and spine in their natural alignment, with your ears alongside your biceps. Keep your weight evenly distributed between your hands and feet. Press your heels down toward the floor while keeping your shoulders down and rolled back. (If necessary, bend your knees slightly and let your heels come up off the floor.) Hold, then return to the starting position. Standing chest and shoulder stretch Targets: chest, shoulder, biceps Stand at arm's length away from a doorway, facing away from it. Extend your left arm and put your left hand on the edge of the door frame, slightly below shoulder level, palm facing forward and touching the door frame. Keep your shoulders down and back. Slowly turn your body to the right, away from the door frame, until you feel the stretch in your chest and shoulder. If the stretch is too difficult, lower your arm on the door frame. Hold the stretch, then return to the starting position. Repeat on the other side to complete one rep. Floor pretzel Targets: buttocks, hip, thigh Lie on your back with your right knee bent and the right foot on the floor. Rest your left ankle at the top of your right knee. Your left knee should point to the side. Grasp the back of your right thigh with both hands. Keep your shoulders down and back, relaxing them against the floor. Slowly lift your right foot off the floor until you feel the stretch in your left hip and buttock. Hold, then return to the starting position. Repeat with your left knee bent and your right ankle resting on your left knee. If it's too hard to grasp your thigh with both hands, put a strap or towel around the back of the thigh and hold both ends. Double knee torso rotation Targets: back, chest, hip, thigh Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet together, flat on the floor. Put your arms out to each side at shoulder level, palms up. Tighten your abdominal muscles and lift both knees toward your chest, then lower them together to the left side. Go to the floor or as close as possible. Keeping your shoulders relaxed and pressed into the floor, look in the opposite direction. Feel the stretch across your chest and torso. To come out, bring both knees back to center and return your right foot, then your left foot, to the floor. Repeat the stretch in the opposite direction. 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