



Guide to Basic Stretches

Stretching is a great way to bring relaxation to your body, improve flexibility, and bring oxygen to your muscles. Follow these instructions on some basic stretches you can do throughout the day.

As you try each stretch, be sure to listen to your body and stop if anything is uncomfortable. If it feels okay, try holding each stretch for several seconds. The more you practice stretching, the more you will improve your flexibility.

Morning Stretches

These ideas will help you ease from sleep to wakeful energy.

Open Heart

- Stand up with relaxed legs and arms. Don't lock your knees. Allow yourself to breathe normally. Alternatively, in a chair, relax your arms and legs.
- On the inhale, put both of your arms straight out in front of you at shoulder level.
- Gradually move your arms at shoulder level toward your back and exhale slowly. Resist the urge to hold your breath.
- As you move your arms toward your back, notice the gentle stretch of your chest.
- Gently clasp your arms behind your back and inhale.
- With arms behind you, breathe normally for 10-30 seconds based on your level of comfort, and enjoy the stretch of your chest as you greet the day.

Upper back stretch

- Stand (or sit) with your legs about shoulder-width apart.
- Inhale and clasp your hands in front of you and round your upper back, keeping your arms straight in front of you.
- On the exhale, round your upper back, pushing your arms out straight in front of you.
- Imagine that your shoulder blades are opening wide across your back.
- Breathe deeply and regularly as you do this.
- Hold for 10-30 seconds based on your level of comfort.

Cat – Cow Stretch

- Get down on all fours if you can do so comfortably.
- As you inhale, look up toward the ceiling as you arch your back.
- As you exhale, bring your head down as if you are going to look at your feet. Curve your back up like you're a cat.
- Repeat this several times.

Skyscraper

- Inhale and reach your arms high up over your head.
- Exhale and return to your starting position with your hands at your sides.

- You'll feel the stretch in your shoulders, back and torso.
- Do this as many times as you please.

Daytime Stretching and Movement

Just as movement in the morning can help invigorate you to start the day, deliberate periods of gentle movement throughout the day can give you an energy boost, help combat physical pain, and reduce the effects of stress.

Face Massage (good for overall tension, eye, or jaw pain)

- Start by closing your eyes and noticing your breath. Take a couple of deep breaths. Bring your index and middle fingers to your temples.
- Press gently and with slow, small circles, massage the area around your temples.
- While continuing the gentle massage and breathing, slowly move your fingers up your brow line, then down to your brows and finally back to your temples.
- Move your fingers in front of and around your ears, massaging your jaw.
- Become aware of any other areas of stress in your face or on your head, and gently massage those areas.

Neck Stretch

- Start by closing your eyes and noticing your breath. You will complete each movement on an inhale or exhale. Breathe slowly and deeply through your nose.
- Inhale through your nose, and, on the exhale, slowly bend your head down, bringing your chin to your chest. If comfortable, stay in this position for a count of five breaths.
- On an inhale, slowly bring your head up, looking straight at the ceiling, feeling your chest opening and your breath reaching your belly, holding for a count of five breaths.
Note: Do not overextend your neck backwards. Only look up toward the ceiling enough to feel the gentle stretch of your neck.
- On the exhale, slowly bring your right ear to your right shoulder. Ensure your shoulders remain loose, extending your neck only as far as is comfortable. Hold for five breaths.
- On the exhale, slowly bring your left ear to your left shoulder, holding for a count of five breaths. On the final exhale, allow your head to return to a neutral position.

Arm/Shoulder Stretch

- From a seated or standing position, begin breathing normally through your nose.
- On the inhale, bring your palms together at your chest.
- On the exhale, intertwine your fingers and slowly extend your hands, palms forward, until your arms are straight.
- On the inhale, bring your arms up over your head with your palms facing the ceiling.
- On the exhale, allow your arms to slowly come back down to your sides.

Deep Shoulder Stretch

- Stand (or sit) with your feet shoulder-width apart and breathe through your nose.

- On the exhale, bend your knees (skip if seated) and slowly bend forward, bringing the top of your head toward the floor (or between your knees while seated) and allowing your arms to dangle freely toward the floor.
- On the inhale, slowly clasp your hands behind your back, interlacing the fingers.
- On the exhale, release your arms to gravity, letting your arms move toward your head as they are able. Do not strain or push, just allow your arms to stretch comfortably.
- Hold this position for five breaths, and, on the exhale, slowly stand up, allowing your arms to return to a natural position at your side.

Stretching to Help with Sleep

There may be no better way to incorporate stretching into your day than by starting a regular bedtime stretching practice. Relaxing your muscles in the evening can help you shake off daily stressors and get rid of any muscle tension that set in over the course of your day. These stretching exercises can also help prepare your body for sleep. In fact, including these stretches as part of your wind-down ritual can help you prepare your body and mind so that you fall asleep faster and have a better night's sleep.

Standing Forward Bend

Standing forward bends are particularly helpful for reducing back and neck tension before sleep.

- Stand (or sit) with your legs about shoulder-width apart.
- Fold your upper body over your legs, as if you were trying to touch your toes.
- If the backs of your legs are very tight, bend your knees to make the stretch more comfortable.
- Gravity can help you get a better stretch. Grab each elbow with the opposite hand and let your head hang down.
- Stand up (or sit back up), take a few deep breaths, and then fold over your legs again.

Seated Side Bend

- Seated side bend stretches are another great way to relieve upper body tension while also giving a good stretch to your arms and side muscles.
- Find a comfortable seated position. When you're practicing this at home, you may choose to sit on the edge of your bed or you may choose to sit cross-legged on the floor.
- Place your right hand on the bed or floor next to your right hip.
- Raise your left arm. Lean to the right and stretch that left arm over your head. Keep your shoulders down and relaxed – watch out for the tendency to “hunch” them up.
- Continue to extend your left arm. Hold the side stretch for several deep breaths before you return to the beginning comfortable seated position.
- Repeat the side stretch on the other side, placing your left hand on the bed or floor next to your right hip, and leaning to your left while extending your right arm.

Legs up the Wall

- Find a clear spot on your floor near a wall. Sit facing the wall and lie down.
- Keeping your upper back on the floor, extend your legs up the wall so that your body is at a 90-degree angle, creating an "L" shape. Keep your knees as straight as possible.
- Let your arms relax at your sides, palms up, and breathe slowly and deeply.
- Hold this position for at least 60 seconds, or as long as it feels good.