

# Sample Flexibility Plan for Beginners



Stretching the body's muscles provides freedom of movement to do the things you need to do and the things you like to do. Stretching can improve your flexibility, although it will not improve your endurance or strength.

## How Much, How Often

- Stretch **after** you do your regularly scheduled strength and aerobic activities. You should be stretching every day.
- If you can't do endurance or strength exercises, and stretching exercises are the only kind you are able to do, do them at least 3 times a week, for at least 20 minutes each session.
- Do each stretching exercise at least 4 times each session. Slowly stretch into the desired position, as far as possible without pain, and hold the stretch for 15–60 seconds. Relax, then repeat, trying to stretch a little farther. Always remember to breathe while stretching. Counting out loud can help ensure that you are breathing.

## Safety

- If you have had a hip or knee replacement, check with your surgeon before doing lower body exercises.
- Always warm up before doing stretching exercises. For example, do them after endurance or strength exercises or, if you are doing only stretching exercises on a particular day, do a little bit of easy walking and arm-pumping first.
- Stretching should never cause pain, especially joint pain. If it does, you are stretching too far and you need to reduce the stretch so that it doesn't hurt. Mild discomfort or a mild pulling sensation is normal. Never “bounce” into a stretch; make slow, steady movements instead. Jerking into position can cause muscles to tighten, possibly resulting in injury.
- Avoid “locking” your joints into place when you straighten them during stretches. Your arms and legs should be straight when you stretch them, but you should always have a very small amount of bend in your joints while stretching.

- Some of the exercises require you to lie on the floor. If you are afraid to lie on the floor because you think you won't be able to get back up, consider exercising with a buddy, in a chair, or in the pool. Alternatively, keep a chair nearby to use as support in getting up. All stretches can be modified.

### Getting Started

Stretching exercises are generally performed at a low intensity. You can progress in your stretching exercises;

the way to know how to limit yourself is that stretching should never hurt. It may feel slightly uncomfortable, but not painful. Push yourself to stretch farther, but not so far that it hurts. Perform the following exercises, in order, as described below.

Detailed instructions for each exercise are provided at the end of this handout and are taken from *Exercise: A Guide from the National Institute on Aging*.

## STRETCH REPETITIONS, SETS, AND SESSIONS

Flexibility Exercise/ Stretch	# of repetitions per set	# of sets per session	# of sessions per week
Hamstrings	4 per side	1	After every aerobic or strength session
Alternative Hamstrings	4 per side	1	After every aerobic or strength session
Calves	4 per side	1	After every aerobic or strength session
Ankles	4 per side	1	After every aerobic or strength session
Triceps	4 per side	1	After every aerobic or strength session
Wrists	4 per side	1	After every aerobic or strength session
Quadriceps	4 per side	1	After every aerobic or strength session
Double Hip Rotation	4 per side	1	After every aerobic or strength session
Single Hip Rotation	4 per side	1	After every aerobic or strength session
Shoulder Rotation	4 per side	1	After every aerobic or strength session
Neck Rotation	4 per side	1	After every aerobic or strength session
Side Leg Raise	4 per side	1	After every aerobic or strength session

If you are not currently doing aerobic or strength activities, do flexibility and stretching at least 3 times per week for at least 20 minutes per session.

## EXERCISES

### Hamstrings

*Stretches muscles in the back of the thigh*

- Sit sideways on bench or other hard surface (such as two chairs placed side by side).
- Keep one leg stretched out on bench, straight, toes pointing up.
- Keep other leg off of bench, with foot flat on floor.
- Straighten back.
- If you feel a stretch at this point, hold the position for 15–60 seconds.
- If you don't feel a stretch, lean forward from hips (not waist) until you feel stretching in leg on bench, keeping back and shoulders straight. Omit this step if you have had a hip replacement, unless surgeon/therapist approves.
- Hold position for 15–60 seconds.
- Repeat with other leg.
- Repeat at least 4 times on each side.



### Alternative Hamstrings Stretch

*Stretches muscles in the back of the thigh*

- Stand behind chair, holding on with both hands.
- Bend forward from the hips (not waist), keeping back and shoulders straight at all times.
- When upper body is parallel to floor, hold position for 15–60 seconds. You should feel a stretch in the backs of your thighs.
- Repeat at least 4 times.



### Calves

*Stretches lower leg muscles in two ways: with knee straight and knee bent*

- Stand with hands against wall, arms outstretched and elbows straight.
- Keeping your left knee slightly bent, toes of right foot slightly turned inward, step back 1–2 feet with right leg, heel, and foot flat on floor. You should feel a stretch in your calf muscle, but you shouldn't feel uncomfortable. If you don't feel a stretch, move your foot farther back until you do.



- Hold position for 15–60 seconds.
- Bend knee of right leg, keep heel and foot flat on floor.
- Hold position for another 15–60 seconds.
- Repeat with left leg.
- Repeat at least 4 times for each leg.



## Ankles

### *Stretches front ankle muscles*

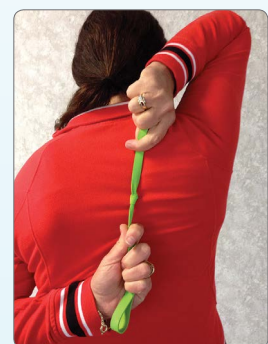
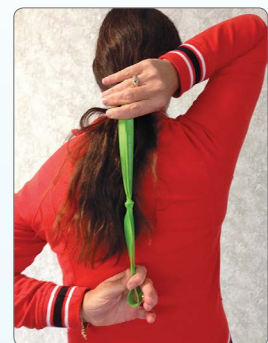
- Remove your shoes. Sit toward the front edge of a chair and lean back, using pillows to support your back.
- Stretch legs out in front of you.
- With your heels still on the floor, bend ankles to point feet toward you.
- Next, bend ankles to point feet away from you.
- If you don't feel the stretch, repeat with your feet slightly off the floor.
- Hold the position for 15–60 seconds.
- Repeat at least 4 times.



## Triceps

### *Stretches muscles in back of upper arm*

- Hold one end of a towel in right hand.
- Raise and bend right arm to drape towel down back. Keep your right arm in this position, and continue holding onto the towel.
- Reach behind your lower back and grasp bottom end of towel with left hand.
- Climb left hand progressively higher up towel, which also pulls your right arm down. Continue until your hands touch, or as close to that as you can comfortably go. Hold for 15–60 seconds.
- Reverse positions.
- Repeat each position at least 4 times.



## Wrists

### *Stretches wrist muscles*

- Place hands together, in praying position.
- Slowly raise elbows so arms are parallel to floor, keeping hands flat against each other.
- Hold position for 15–60 seconds.
- Repeat at least 4 times.



## FLOOR EXERCISES

### About Floor Exercises

Most of the remaining exercises are done on the floor and stretch some very important muscle groups. If you are afraid to lie on the floor to exercise because you think you won't be able to get back up, consider using the buddy system to do these. Find a buddy who will be able to help you.

Knowing the right way to get into a lying position on the floor and to get back up also may be helpful. If you have had a hip replacement, check with your surgeon before using the following methods. If you have osteoporosis, check with your doctor first.

#### To get into a lying position:

- Stand next to a very sturdy chair that won't tip over (put chair against wall for support if you need to).
- Put your hands on the seat of the chair.
- Lower yourself down on one knee.
- Bring the other knee down.
- Put your left hand on the floor and lean on it as you bring your left hip to the floor.
- Your weight is now on your left hip.
- Straighten your legs out.
- Lie on your left side.
- Roll onto your back.

*Note: You don't have to use your left side. You can use your right side, if you prefer.*

#### To get up from a lying position:

- Roll onto your left side.
- Use your right hand, placed on the floor at about the level of your ribs, to push your shoulders off the floor.
- Your weight is on your left hip.
- Roll forward, onto your knees, leaning on your hands for support. Lean your hands on the seat of the chair you used to lie down.
- Lift one of your knees so that one leg is bent, foot flat on the floor.
- Leaning your hands on the seat of the chair for support, rise from this position.

*Note: You don't have to use your left side. You can reverse positions, if you prefer.*

## Quadriceps

*Stretches muscles in front of thighs*

- Lie on side on the floor. Your hips should be lined up so that one is directly above the other one.
- Rest head on pillow or hand.
- Bend knee that is on top.
- Reach back and grab heel of that leg. If you can't reach your heel with your hand, loop a belt over your foot and hold belt ends.
- Gently pull that leg until front of thigh stretches.
- Hold position for 15–60 seconds.
- Reverse position and repeat.
- Repeat at least 4 times on each side. If the back of your thigh cramps during this exercise, stretch your leg and try again, more slowly.



## Shoulder Rotation

*Stretches shoulder muscles*

- Lie flat on floor, pillow under head, legs straight. If your back bothers you, place a rolled towel under your knees.
- Stretch arms straight out to side. Your shoulders and upper arms will remain flat on the floor throughout this exercise.
- Bend elbows so that your hands are pointing toward the ceiling.
- Let your arms slowly roll backwards from the elbow. Stop when you feel a stretch or slight discomfort, and stop immediately if you feel a pinching sensation or a sharp pain.
- Hold position for 15–60 seconds.
- Slowly raise your arms, still bent at the elbow, to point toward the ceiling again. Then let your arms slowly roll forward, remaining bent at the elbow, to point toward your hips. Stop when you feel a stretch or slight discomfort.
- Hold position for 15–60 seconds.
- Alternate pointing above head, then toward ceiling, then toward hips. Begin and end with pointing-above-head position.
- Repeat 4 times.



## Double Hip Rotation

*Stretches outer muscles of hips and thighs. Unless your surgeon approves, don't do this exercise if you have had a hip replacement*

- Lie on floor on your back, knees bent and feet flat on the floor.
- Keep shoulders on floor at all times.
- Keeping knees bent and together, gently lower legs to one side as far as possible without forcing them.
- Hold position for 15–60 seconds.
- Return legs to upright position.
- Repeat toward other side.
- Repeat at least 4 times on each side.



## Single Hip Rotation

*Stretches muscles of pelvis and inner thigh. Unless your surgeon approves, don't do this exercise if you have had a hip replacement*

- Lie on your back on floor, knees bent and feet flat on the floor.
- Keep shoulders on floor throughout exercise.
- Lower one knee slowly to side, keeping the other leg and your pelvis in place.
- Hold position for 15–60 seconds.
- Bring knee back up slowly.
- Repeat with other knee.
- Repeat at least 4 times on each side.



## Neck Rotation

*Stretches neck muscles*

- Lie on the floor with a phone book or other thick book under your head.
- Slowly turn head from side-to-side, holding position each time for 15–60 seconds on each side. Your head should not be tipped forward or backward, but should be in a comfortable position. You can keep your knees bent to keep your back comfortable during this exercise.
- Repeat at least 4 times.

