

**helen to the rescue** By **Helen Pufahl**, Resident Contributor

# Stretching

Does stretching take a back seat to your exercise routine? Maybe you think stretching is something only athletes do? It's not enough to build muscle and aerobic fitness. Stretching increases flexibility, improves range of motion, and decreases the risk of joint injury, strains, and muscle damage.

Studies about the benefits of stretching have had mixed results. We used to believe that stretching was necessary to warm up the muscles and prepare them for activity. However, mounting research has shown that stretching the muscles before they're warmed up can hurt them. When everything is cold, the fibers aren't prepared and may be damaged (like pulling on a rubber band straight out of the freezer). All it takes to warm up the muscles before stretching is 5 to 10 minutes of light activity, such as a quick walk. You can also stretch after aerobic activities or weight training. This will get blood flow to muscle tissue, making it more pliable and amenable to change.

Before you plunge into stretching, make sure you do it safely and effectively. While you can stretch anytime, anywhere, proper technique is key. Stretching incorrectly can do more harm than good; remember, we are not gymnasts or dancers. Stretch the body's major muscle groups, calves, thighs, hips, lower back, neck, shoulders, and joints that you routinely use in your daily activities.

Although there are many ways to stretch, they can all be grouped into one of two categories: static or dynamic. Dynamic stretches are performed with movement that extends the muscle's range of motion. Static stretching is considered the safest and most effective form of stretching to improve overall flexibility. Flexibility is the absolute range of motion that can be achieved without movement, how far you can reach, bend, or turn and hold that position. Listed below are a few examples of static stretches to try at home. With all these in mind, please exercise caution, hold each stretch for 30 to 60 seconds, and expect to feel tension while you're stretching, not pain.

## Upper Back

Push your hands away from your chest, relax your upper back, feel a stretch between your shoulder blades.



Lower Back



Upper Back

## Shoulder

Place your arm across the front of your chest. Bend other arm up to ease arm closer to your chest. Feel the stretch in the shoulder.

## Hamstring

Extend one leg on a raised surface and sit back into the opposite heel.

## Calf

With one foot flat on steps, lower opposite heel.

## Quadriceps

Grasp the top of your ankle with your hands or a belt.

## Lower Back

Single knee to chest-hold over or below the knee

I bend so I don't break.

Yours in fitness,  
Helen



## Helen Pufahl MS, NASM-CPT

**Helen's love of fitness began at an early age. She practiced dance, gymnastics as well as track and field. She's an Exercise Physiologist with 35 years of experience. She is also a certified personal trainer, corrective exercise specialist, nutrition consultant, and Senior fitness specialist. Helen is the owner of Unique Health & Fitness.**

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