



Information Guide

Your Health and Fitness



Chair-based flexibility exercises

What this guide is about

Flexibility exercises, or stretches, are used to improve your range of motion at your joints. A healthy functional range of movement is important for everyday life - for example, reaching overhead for something on a shelf or putting on a jacket.

Flexibility exercises are most effective when muscles have been warmed through light or moderate aerobic activity. You are therefore recommended to warm-up first before you engage in stretching. Stretching is traditionally done twice in a workout:

1. *Warm-up or preparatory stretches* are carried out towards the end of the warm-up (at the start of your workout), after mobilising joints and performing some aerobic activity to warm muscles and boost circulation. Increased mobility is generally achieved through the preceding warm-up exercises. Some areas of the body, however, need special attention. The purpose of these warm-up flexibility exercises is to stretch the specified muscles in preparation for the work to come, and taking your joints through their full range of movement. Hold each stretch for a short time, 8-10 seconds – so you do not start to cool down if you are static for too long (thereby defeating the purpose of the warm-up!) – preparatory stretching is usually followed by more aerobic activity to re-warm the muscles ready for the main part of the workout.
2. *Cool-down stretches* are performed at the end of the cool-down. The purpose of these exercises is to achieve a good healthy functional range of movement and improve flexibility. Each stretch is held statically for longer than their warm-up counterparts; a minimum of 10-30 seconds is recommended.

Please see the following information guide for information on creating your own chair-based exercise workout to see where flexibility exercises fall within it:

- Building your own chair-based exercise session.

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How much stretching should I do?

In the table below you will find the American College of Sport Medicine's recommendations for stretching (ACSM, 2014):

Frequency (how often)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At least 2-3 days per week, with daily stretching being most effective.
Intensity (how hard)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stretch to the point of feeling tightness or slight discomfort.
Time (how long)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Holding these stretches for 10-30 seconds is recommended for most adults. It is recommended to repeat each stretch two to four times. Older adults may gain greater benefits holding these stretches for 30-60 seconds each.
Type (what to do)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are different types of stretches you can do. In this guide we only include static stretches performed from a seated position. For older adults, any physical activities that maintain or increase flexibility using slow movements terminating in sustained stretches are recommended for each major muscle group, using static stretches rather than rapid ballistic movements.

How quickly can I expect to see improvement?

ACSM (2014) state that range of motion (ROM) around joints improves immediately after stretching, with long-term improvements occurring after about three to four weeks (if you were to stretch at least two or three times a week).

Seated Posture



There are a lot of key points to remember here. Do not worry about remembering them all at once – focus on a couple each time you exercise and they will soon become a habit.

Feedback from another person or from looking at yourself in a mirror is a good way of checking and improving your seated posture.



**BREATHE COMFORTABLY
AT ALL TIMES**

1. Triceps stretch

Purpose:

- You will feel this stretch in the back of the arms.

Instructions:

- Raise your left arm overhead.
- Bend your elbow, placing your left hand between your shoulder blades (palm pressed against the upper back).
- Grasp your left upper arm just below the elbow with your right hand.
- Push back to feel a stretch in your triceps.
- Repeat on the right arm.



2. Shoulder stretch

Purpose:

- You will feel this stretch in the muscles surrounding the shoulder joint.

Instructions:

- Reach across your chest with your left arm.
- Grasp your upper arm above the elbow with your right hand, and pull your left arm to your chest.
- Hold for a few seconds, then repeat on the right arm.



3. Upper back stretch

Purpose:

- You will feel this stretch in the muscles of the upper back.

Instructions:

- Clasp both hands together in front of the body (at chest height), one on top of the other - do not interlink fingers.
- Push the hands forwards as far as comfortable, while keeping the upper body upright - aim to separate the shoulder blades.
- Hold for a few seconds.



4. Pec stretch

Purpose:

- You will feel this stretch in the muscles of the chest.

Instructions:

- Extend your arms out to the side.
- Gently push your chest forwards and upwards until a stretch is felt across your chest.
- Hold for a few seconds.



5. Chest stretch

Purpose:

- You will feel this stretch in the muscles of the chest and front of the shoulders.

Instructions:

- Hold the back of the chair with both hands and lean forwards slightly, lifting upwards and drawing the shoulders back until a stretch is felt in the chest.
- Hold for a few seconds.



6. Wall pushes

Purpose:

- You will feel this stretch in the muscles of the shoulder and upper back.

Instructions:

- Pull the wrist of the left hand back and push the open palm across the chest, pretending to push against a wall on the right side - twist your upper body to the right as you do so.
- Hold for a few seconds, and then repeat on the other side.



7. Finger walks

Purpose:

- You will feel this stretch in the muscles at the side of your waist.

Instructions:

- With your right hand, walk the fingers down the side of your chair, leaning sideways as you do so – do not lean backwards or forwards, or twist.
- Hold at the end of the movement for a few seconds, and then repeat on the other side.



8. Hug stretch

Purpose:

- You will feel this stretch in the muscles of the upper back.

Instructions:

- Lift both arms straight out to the sides, level with your shoulders.
- Pull both arms in and across your chest, reaching towards the back of the opposite shoulder.
- Lower your chin to chest, and give yourself a big hug, trying to separate your shoulder blades as far as possible.
- Hold for a few seconds.



9. Cat stretch

Purpose:

- You will feel this stretch in the muscles of your middle back.

Instructions:

- Place your hands on your thighs just above your knees, fingers pointing in.
- Push your feet into the floor and hands into thighs as you pull your navel inwards towards your spine slightly.
- Hunch your upper back and drop your chin to your chest.
- Hold for a few seconds.



10. Dog stretch

Purpose:

- You will feel this stretch in the muscles acting on the spine.

Instructions:

- Place your hands on your thighs just above your knees, fingers pointing in.
- Push your feet into the floor and hands into thighs as you lift your chest and push your hips back, arching your lower back.
- Hold for a few seconds.



11. Back and ham stretch

Purpose:

- You will feel this stretch in the muscles of your bottom, back of thighs, and back.

Instructions:

- Bring a knee up towards your chest.
- Hug it with both arms, trying to separate your shoulder blades as you do so.
- Hold for a few seconds, and then repeat with the other leg.



12. Thigh stretch

Purpose:

- You will feel this stretch in the muscles on the front of your thighs.

Instructions:

- Spread your legs apart.
- Turn to the right, so your right knee is bent with ankle under the knee – hold the back of the chair with the right hand for support. Your left leg will also be bent, with the knee just off the floor (see the photo below).
- Grab the left foot with the left hand, and pull your left heel towards your left buttock (a towel is used in the photo to help with this).
- Hold for a few seconds, and then repeat on the other leg.



13. Hamstring stretch

Purpose:

- You will feel this stretch in the muscles on the back of the thighs.

Instructions:

- Straighten your left leg out in front, resting the heel on the floor so toes point upwards.
- Place both hands on your right thigh just above the knee to support your upper body (or on either side of the seat as shown in the photos).
- Bending from the hips, lean forwards until a stretch is felt in your left hamstrings – ensure your chest is lifted and spine lengthened throughout.
- Hold for a few seconds, and then repeat on the other leg.



14. Inner thigh stretch

Purpose:

- You will feel this stretch in the muscles of the inner thighs.

Instructions:

- Move your feet so they are double shoulder-width apart.
- Place your hands on the inside thighs, fingers pointing inward.
- Keeping the back and neck flat, lean forwards at the hips whilst gently pressing outwards with the hands.
- Hold for a few seconds.



15. Calf stretch

Purpose:

- You will feel this stretch in the muscles of the calf.

Instructions:

- Holding the edges of the seat, straighten the left leg out in front, resting the heel on the floor so toes point upwards.
- Pull the toes of the left foot back towards the shin and slide the heel further forward until a stretch is felt in the left calf.
- Hold for a few seconds, and then repeat on the other leg.



Links

American College of Sports Medicine, and Pescatello, L. S. (2014). *ACSM's guidelines for exercise testing and prescription*. Philadelphia: Wolters Kluwer/Lippincott Williams & Wilkins Health.

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Department of Health (2011) *Start Active, Stay Active*.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/start-active-stay-active-a-report-on-physical-activity-from-the-four-home-countries-chief-medical-officers>

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Please don't throw this guide away when you have finished with it; perhaps pass it on to a friend, health professional or to your local GP surgery.

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Amacsports Ltd, 2 Denne Hill Business Centre, Womenswold, Canterbury, Kent, CT4 6HD
www.allactive.co.uk | info@allactive.co.uk

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