

# REACH OUT

Stretching is the secret to our bodies staying strong, pain-free and mobile, says leading personal trainer Michael Garry. Here, he continues his body-sculpting series to show us the best ways to better mobility.

**W**hy should we stretch? Surely just doing a bit more movement is fine when it comes to overall fitness and wellbeing? While expert opinion is divided as to the importance of stretching for enhanced performance, there's no doubt it helps to build and maintain flexibility, increasing the ability of a joint to move through its full range of motion; in other words, how far it can bend, twist and reach. Better flexibility boosts our mobility – and without mobility, our bodies seize up and eventually we become literally unable to move. 'As we age, stretching becomes all about maintaining (and even improving) our range and quality of movement, preventing injury and improving posture,' says leading personal trainer Michael Garry (*michaalgarry.london*). 'Stretching makes exercise more comfortable and I say to all my clients that the best time for this is in the morning, both before and after an exercise session, such as a weights workout, walk or run.'

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## Flexible friends

Flexibility is one of the three pillars of exercise: cardio, muscle strength and flexibility. Without it we don't move as well. So why do we lose flexibility as we age? It's not just because we tend to be less active than in our younger days. Collagen declines in tendons, leading to stiffness, especially for women in their mid-forties onwards. This is also due to a decline of the natural hormone oestrogen (which is why HRT is so effective at reversing muscle and joint stiffness).

The most useful stretch on a day-to-day basis is the static stretch. This is where we stretch a muscle to the point of mild discomfort (never pain) and hold that position for 30 seconds or longer. Other forms of stretching include the dynamic stretch, where we perform gentle repetitive movements, such as arm swings or knee lifts, which gradually increase the range of motion with each action. Then there are ballistic or bouncing stretches, where we use bounces or jerking movements to increase the range of motion on the 'rebound'. Lastly, there's proprioceptive neuromuscular facilitation (PNF), when we stretch while contracting and relaxing the muscle to deepen the stretch.

Always start stretches with a short warm-up to get the blood circulation going, mobilise the joints and loosen the body. 'This is especially important first thing in the morning, when the body has been lying inactive for many hours,' advises Michael. A warm-up could include sports-specific techniques such as lunges (if you're going out running) or spine twists and shoulder rolls before a Pilates or yoga session. As a general guide, aim for ten minutes of warm-up before a main stretch session. Gradually increase the range of motion, raising heart rate and blood flow to the muscles, warming them up. Warm muscles are less stiff and will work more efficiently. Increased blood flow also allows more oxygen to reach the muscles and produce energy.

## How long to stretch for?

Michael advocates a daily stretch, even if it is just a few minutes before bed. As a general guide, hold each stretch illustrated below for 30 seconds to allow the muscle fibres to release and lengthen. Anything less won't make a significant difference – anything more risks injury. Repeat each stretch on both sides, increasing the number of repetitions according to available time. 🔄

### QUAD STRETCH

Important pre- and post-running. Stand tall, bend your right knee behind you and catch the foot with your right hand. Draw your foot up towards your bottom, keeping the right thigh in line with the front of the left thigh. Draw your tummy button in towards the spine to strengthen the core. Use the back of a chair or a worktop for balance if needed.



### HAMSTRING STRETCH

Super-easy to do lying down, using a wall or doorway for support. Get your backside as close to the wall as possible, while stretching each leg in turn against the wall. Stretch each leg in turn to make it as straight as possible. Hold, breathing deep into the stretch as you straighten, and feel your hamstrings relax and let go.



deeply into the stretch. Gently release and switch legs, repeating on the opposite side.

### HIP ROTATION

Lie on the floor with straight legs. Bend the right knee into the chest, dropping it across the body to the opposite side of the floor. Keep your left shoulder on the floor. Feel the rotational stretch in your lower spine. Hold for as long as comfortable and repeat ten times on each side.



### MID SPINE TWIST

Sit upright with legs straight out in front of you. Bend your right knee in, keeping your foot flat on the floor, close to the groin. Place your left arm over your right knee and use it to pull your body around into a rotation, keeping the left hip rooted to the floor. Gaze over your right shoulder. Hold for as long as comfortable, switch to the other side and repeat six times each.



### FLOOR-BASED QUAD STRETCH

As above, but lying on the floor for a deeper stretch, keeping the body supported on your upper arm, neck protected by the hand. Use the same hand as leg to pull the foot towards your backside, again keeping knees and thighs parallel. Hold, turn over and repeat on the other side.



### HIP STRETCH

Come into a lunge position on the carpet or foam mat, drop the back knee to the floor, keeping the spine upright and chin up. Gradually lower the back hip, pushing the pelvis forwards to increase the opening and depth of the hip stretch. Hold, breathing



### LOWER SPINE STRETCH

Lying on the floor, bend both knees in towards the chest before gently lowering to one side, then the other. Keep arms outstretched with palms facing upwards, keeping both shoulders on the floor as you twist. Repeat ten times each side.



### CALF STRETCH

Elongate calves after walking or running with this simple staircase stretch. Stand on the bottom step, holding the hand rail for balance, and drop one calf down to feel the stretch up through the lower leg. Hold and repeat on the other side.



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