

It's important to stretch your muscles after every exercise session. Here's a sampling of some of my favorite flexibility-boosters for pretty much all the major muscle groups you'll be working in any total-body workout. Combined, they can be done for a few minutes at the end of each exercise session or they can be done several times each for a soothing, relaxing, stand-alone stretch workout (in which case, you'll want to include a 5-minute aerobic warm-up and an additional 5-minute aerobic cool-down).

Standing Hamstring Stretch

Place the heel of one foot up on a chair or rail at about waist height. Keeping your back straight, bend at the waist and press down with your hand on your upper thigh just above your knee. Be sure to keep your hips facing forward, not turned, with your toes pointing straight up and your knee soft (not locked). You should feel a good stretch along the back of your upper thigh. Hold for three to five seconds and repeat six to eight times, deepening the stretch with each repetition. Repeat with the other leg.

Standing Quad Stretch

Stand with your feet slightly apart. Keeping your thighs still and your knees slightly apart but next to each other, raise your lower left leg behind you, lifting the heel of your foot toward your butt. Grab the ankle of your left foot with your left hand and gently pull your heel closer to your butt. If you have trouble keeping your balance, you can hold onto the back of a chair with your free hand. Hold for two to three seconds and repeat six to eight times, deepening the stretch with each repetition. Then do the stretch sequence on your right leg.

Lying Calf Stretch

Lie on your back on a carpeted floor or exercise mat. Raise one leg straight up with a soft knee (not locked), keeping the other bent with your foot flat on the floor. Flex the foot of the raised leg so your toes point toward your head. Wrap a rope, belt or towel around the ball of your raised foot and gently pull your toes straight down to deepen the stretch. Hold for three seconds, and repeat six to eight times, deepening the stretch with each repetition. Repeat with the other leg.

Upper-Back Stretch

Stand about two feet away from a wall, with your feet about hip-width apart and your toes pointing toward the wall. With straight arms, place the palms of your hands flat on the wall at about eye level. Lower your head so your ears are by your upper arms. Your back may arch slightly. Squeeze your shoulder blades together, and you should feel a good stretch in the muscles of your upper back. Hold for three seconds and repeat at least six times, deepening the stretch with each repetition.

Lying Back Stretch

On a carpeted floor or exercise mat, lie flat on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Use your abdominal muscles to bring your knees toward your chest. Keep the small of your back pressed firmly into the floor while lifting your butt and hips slightly off the floor. When you can't bring your knees any closer to your chest

on their own, wrap your arms or hands around the backs of your thighs behind the knees and gently pull your legs deeper into your chest while exhaling fully.

Shoulder Stretch

Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart, your arms down at your sides and your abdominal muscles tucked in. Keeping your left arm straight, bring it up and across your chest toward your right shoulder as far as it will go. Then place your right hand on your upper left arm just above your elbow. Without twisting your upper body – in other words, keep your shoulders square – gently push your left arm toward your right shoulder a few inches more while exhaling. Hold for two to three seconds, and then drop your left arm down and shake it out. Repeat six to eight times, then do the same with your right arm.

Chest Stretch

Stand with your back to a wall. Place your hand palm-down on the wall straight behind you so that your hand lines up with your shoulder. Keep your hips and shoulders squared and your free hand down at your side. Hold for two to three seconds. Repeat the stretch six to eight times. Then repeat the entire sequence with your other arm.

Ball Drape

Lying on your back on a stability ball, drape yourself over the ball so that your pelvis opens up and you feel a good stretch in your abs. Keep your feet flat on the floor as you allow the pressure of the ball to run up through your hips and the small of your back. Your head and neck should fall down the back of the ball while you hold your arms outstretched in a natural position with your fingertips grazing the floor for balance. Hold for two to three seconds, and then repeat six to eight times, deepening the stretch with each repetition.

Cobra

Lie face down on a carpeted floor or exercise mat with your feet wider than shoulder-width apart. Place your hands palms-down on the mat directly under your shoulders. Now push up with your arms to lift your torso off the floor, making sure to keep your pelvis pressed into the floor. Keep your elbows bent, your shoulders relaxed (not shrugged up to your ears), and focus your gaze slightly higher than the horizon. Hold for two to three seconds, and then repeat six to eight times, deepening the stretch with each repetition.

Overhead Stretch

Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart and reach both arms straight over your head with your hands flat against one another and both palms facing forward. Fully extend your arms, point your fingers and reach as high as you can straight up over your head, making your body as long as possible. Hold for two to three seconds and then relax. Repeat six to eight times, deepening the stretch and elongating your body even more with each repetition.