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Stretch out

Relax and rejuvenate with deep stretches that help you move better every day. Whether you’ve been cooped up in an office, racing around doing chores or smashing goals at the gym, a restorative stretching session is just what your body needs to feel long, lean and limber.

This guide brings together a collection of stretches designed to work deep into each muscle group. Grounded in yoga and pilates, these stretches can be done whenever you want to release tension, loosen up and soothe sore muscles.

Let physiotherapist Charissa Fermelis and fitness instructor Simona Mickuviene guide you through each movement. Sink into it, take a deep breath and feel the difference in your mind and body.

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Neck Stretch

**Strengthens:**
Postural muscles

**Stretches:**
Neck, shoulders

**How to:** Begin by taking a few deep breaths in and out to centre your energy and calm your thoughts. Place one hand behind your back to anchor that shoulder in place. Allow your head to tilt gradually to the opposite side, guiding your ear to your shoulder. You’ll feel a stretch down the side of the neck. Intensify the stretch by placing your free hand on your head and applying a comfortable pressure. If you rotate your nose down to your shoulder you’ll notice the stretch creeps a little further around to the back of the neck.

**Tips:** This stretch can be conveniently performed periodically throughout the day. Rather than sitting on the floor, take a moment at your work desk to move your neck and relieve built up tension. Set a regular reminder on your computer calendar or phone to alert you to stretch.

Side neck muscles
“upper trapezius”
“levator scapulae”
**90/90 Hip Stretch**

*Strengthens:*
Hips, groins

*Stretches:*
Spine extensors,
Trunk rotators

→ **How to:** A challenging stretching position to open up the hips and release tension from the back of the pelvis and lower spine. This is most effective if you can maintain a 90° angle at the front knee, between the thigh bones, and at the back knee. Have the centre of your chest lined up with your front thigh bone. Keeping the spine tall and chest lifted, begin to project the chest forward over the front knee.

→ **Tips:** To increase the power of the stretch, direct your chest towards the centre of your front shin, and progress over towards the front ankle. This is a fantastic stretch to finish off a running session or high-intensity cardio workout, as well as releasing tension from the lower back after a weights session.
Backward Roll
Chakrasana

**Strengthens:**
Neck, upper and lower back, legs

**Stretches:**
Arms, shoulders

→ **How to:** The backward roll, when performed correctly, resembles a wheel in motion where the axis of the wheel is the shoulder joint. Lie with your bottom down on the mat and your head and shoulders back, and place your hands next to your ears with your elbows pointed towards the sky. Send your legs to the ceiling and over your head to land on the floor behind you, before pushing up strongly with your arms to end in a downward dog pose. Use your deep breathing technique in the final push with your arms to assist the momentum.

→ **Tips:** This is quite an advanced movement sequence involving a coordinated mixture of flexibility, strength and control. A good indication for your readiness to progress to this movement sequence is the ability to confidently perform a shoulder stand and downward dog.
Backbend
Urdhva, Dhanurasana

Strengthens:
Arms, shoulders, buttocks, legs

Stretches:
Chest, spine, abdominals, hips

→ How to: Lying on your back, position your hands next to your ears with the elbows pointing up. Press strongly into the floor with your hands and feet, lift the tailbone towards the pubic bone and roll the pelvis high into the air. If this full backbend seems a little scary, perhaps the bridge (on the next page) may be a more achievable option.

→ Tips: Extending the spine brings about numerous physiological benefits, such as relieving tension in the neck and shoulders. With the head gently hanging from the neck in this pose, we take advantage of the effect of gravity and provide traction for the intervertebral joints. Stretching the abdominals is said to aid digestion and abdominal organ function, and extending the thoracic spine opens the heart.
**Bridge**
*Setu Bandha Sarvangasana*

**Strengthens:**
Buttocks, legs

**Stretches:**
Neck, shoulders, hips, thighs

→ **How to:** A modification of the backbend, this move focuses on lower body strength. Leave your arms on the floor reaching towards your toes. Press the soles of the feet firmly into the floor and push the pelvis up off the floor with the tailbone chasing the pubic bone. You will feel a stretch down the back of the neck and strong activity in the back of the legs. Press your arms firmly back into the floor and interlace your fingers underneath you, which will provide stability for your spine.

→ **Tips:** Listen to your body and give it what you feel it needs on any particular day. Modifying your practice and stretching from day to day encourages versatility and allows you to address specific needs as they arise. Doing a simpler version of a stretch is not a bad thing; it means you’re focusing your attention and tuning in to your body.
**Butterfly**  
*Baddha Konasana*

**Strengthens:**  
Spine erectors, lower abdominals

**Stretches:**  
Groins, inner thighs, knees

→ **How to:** Sit up very tall, with your knees bent and the soles of your feet together. Grasp your feet tightly with your hands, bringing the heels as close to the groin as possible. Gently press your knees outwards and down towards the ground. You can sustain this position and lean forward to increase the intensity of the stretch, using your elbows to push your thighs further towards the ground. Alternatively, start to flap both legs up and down like the wings of a butterfly. Start slowly and gradually increase the speed. Keep breathing normally throughout.

→ **Tips:** This stretch is sometimes referred to as the ‘cobbler pose’, as it resembles the sitting position of a cobbler at work. Instead of sitting at your dining table to have dinner, why not imagine you are in Southeast Asia and sit on the floor at the coffee table in a similar pose to this!
C-Curve

Strengthens:
Abdominals

Stretches:
Neck, upper back, ribs

➔ How to: Sit tall on your two sitting bones, legs bent with feet on the floor. Wrap your arms under your knees and hug them in close. Inhale to elongate your spine, exhale and allow your chin to bow down to your chest as you round the upper back into a C-shape. Hold this stretch and breathe deeply into the back ribs before sitting erect once more. Ensure your neck stays long, your shoulders fall away from your ears, and you maintain width across your chest and back.

➔ Tips: Many of us carry excess tension and strain in our necks, often as a physical manifestation of stress or as a result of stiffness through the ribs and back. With some focused attention and simple movements such as this C-curve stretch, we can promote mobility in the neck joints, ribs, spine and surrounding musculature, such as the layers of intercostal muscles.
Camel
_Ustrasana_

**Strengthens:**
Buttocks, abdominals

**Stretches:**
Neck, chest, abdominals, hips, thighs

→ **How to:** Begin kneeling with your legs parallel, shins and feet pressing firmly into the floor. For the initial stretch, place your palms on your bottom, gaze up to the sky, project your chest upwards and extend the upper back. Find stability in this pose by encouraging your pelvis to press forwards and your thighs to push backwards. To deepen the stretch, reach your hands for your heels. You will notice that your spine extends further, but the demand on your abdominals and gluteals is greater.

→ **Tips:** For most people, we spend more time bending forwards in our daily lives than in any other direction. Most stretches which include a back bend or spine extension will be beneficial. Opening up the front of the hips and thighs is an excellent way to release tension from the lower back following long periods of sitting or repetitive forward bending.

**Quadriceps**
“rectus femoris”
**Candle Salamba Sarvangasana**

**Strengthens:**
Arms, abdominals

**Stretches:**
Neck, shoulders

→ **How to:** Begin lying on your back with your legs together and your arms reaching straight down to your toes. Press your arms into the floor, raise your legs off the floor and point your toes up to the ceiling, then to the wall behind you. You will need to peel your tailbone and pelvis off the floor and aim to have your legs parallel to the floor. At this point place your hands either side of your lower back for support. From here, begin to extend the toes towards the ceiling to end up in the vertical candlestick.

→ **Tips:** The candle pose is the final step in the movement sequence often called the ‘supported shoulder stand’ and is considered to be an intermediate to advanced pose. The inverted nature of this posture encourages lymphatic drainage and blood flow to the brain. This feels fabulous if you’ve been on your feet all day or have had a heavy leg workout!

**Neck extensor**
“semispinalis cervicis”
“splenius cervicis”
Up-Facing Dog
Urdhva Mukha Svanasana

**Strengthens:**
Arms, shoulders, upper back

**Stretches:**
Abdominals

**How to:** Lying face down with your hands tucked in next to your chest and your elbows pointing up, inhale to prepare. Exhale and press through the hands to lift your chest upwards and forwards into upward facing dog. Feel a stretch through your abdominals and lengthening up the spine, visualising yourself as a cobra. Carefully allow the head to tilt backwards to open the front of the neck and throat.

**Tips:** Your legs may seem like they’re not doing much, but they are working hard! Keep them glued together, with the toes pointing long to encourage toning and elongation through the whole body.

Front neck muscles “anterior scalene”
Downward Dog
Adho Mukha Svanasana

**Strengthens:**
Arms, shoulder girdle, abdominals, feet and ankles

**Stretches:**
Hamstrings, calves

→ **How To:** To prepare, set up on all fours, with your hands and knees on the floor, hands under shoulders and knees under hips, toes tucked under at the back and your spine in a neutral position. On a deep exhale, press your hips toward the ceiling to form an inverted V-shape. Your back is straight with the front ribs tucked in. Your arms and legs are straight with your heels reaching to the floor. Spread your fingers and toes wide apart to increase your base of support. Sustain this position as you breathe deeply and freely.

→ **Tips:** This traditional yoga pose integrates the entire body and builds strength throughout. In addition to its many physical benefits, it is also said to relieve fatigue and rejuvenate the body, improve the immune system, aid digestion, calm the mind and lift the spirits.

Calf muscles
“gastrocnemius”
“soleus”
Three-Legged Dog
Eka Pada Adho Mukha Svanasana

Strengthens:
Arms, shoulder girdle, abdominals, feet and ankles, buttocks

Stretches:
Hamstrings, adductors, calves

→ How to: Starting from the four-legged downward dog position, engage one buttck muscle and lift that leg behind you. Reach the knee to the ceiling for a short-lever variation, or extend the knee also, so your body forms an inverted 'Y' shape. The real challenge is controlling the transition from a reverse plank, via a rotation or pivoting motion. With one leg in the air we get a slight rotation through the pelvis, which biases the medial hamstrings on the supporting leg to elongate, while the adductors and hip flexors on the elevated leg lengthen.

→ Tips: You will find one leg harder to lift or less coordinated than the other. It is tempting to practice your preferred leg more than the non-preferred, but it’s beneficial to aim for symmetry in the body. This allows for forces to be distributed evenly through the limbs and torso and reduce the risk of injury.

Hamstring
“semimembranosus”
“semitendinosus”
Child’s Pose
Balasana

**Stretches:**
Groins, hips, knees, spine, shoulders

**How to:** The shape of the leg position can vary depending on the mobility within your hip and knee joints. Aiming for a 90° angle at the knee and hip will open up the short adductor muscles in the front of the groin. Making an ‘M’ shape with the legs will take the stretch more to the adductor magnus, down the back of the inside thigh. Reach your arms forward, allowing your head to rest between them. Feel your spine lengthening and a sense of traction as you ease into the stretch.

**Tips:** The hip joint is a ball and socket joint, allowing for a large amount of movement in all directions. Few of us utilise all of this available range of movement, resulting in stiffness and weakness around the hip and surrounding areas such as the sacroiliac joints and lumbar spine.
Wide-Legged Forward Bend
Prasarita Padottanasana

Strengthens:
Inner thighs, ankles, feet

Stretches:
Spine, hips, legs

→ How to: Step your feet wide apart, pressing firmly through the heels and balls of your feet while lifting the arches. Inhale to lift your chest so the front torso is slightly longer than the back. Exhale and hinge forward from the hip joints, folding the body in half while keeping the spine elongated. Your sitting bones will be high up in the air and reaching for the ceiling. Place the palms on the floor directly underneath you and pull your head and chest towards them. Aim to gradually nudge your feet wider apart while encouraging your head closer to the floor.

→ Tips: Inverting the upper body in this way allows the spine to hang off the pelvis upside down, essentially creating traction along its length. This eliminates the force of gravity, thereby assisting in decompressing the lower spine and relieving backache.

Outer ankle
“peroneus longus and brevis”
Forward Fold with a Twist
Parivrtta Prasarita Padottanasana

→ How to: Step your feet wide apart and press the whole of each foot firmly into the ground. Aim your sitting bones high in the air as you fold your body in half at the hip joints. Lengthen your spine from head to tail to create space for your ribs to move. Reach your right arm towards your left foot and hold firmly around the outside of the arch as an anchor. Use your free arm to reach up to the ceiling, feeling a generous twist through the trunk and chest.

→ Tips: Our bodies are made up of hundreds of intricate joints that allow us to move in many directions. When we don’t use all of this flexibility, our joints get stiffer and our muscles get weaker and tighter. Twisting the body helps to mobilise the rib cage and improves lung function.
Stretches:
Hip, groin, legs

Wide-Angle Seated Forward Bend
Upavistha Konasana

How to: Sit on the floor with your legs extended out to the sides. Keep a slight bend in the knees to release some tension off the back of your legs and allow you to sit up tall. Place your fingertips on the floor in front of your knees, slide your hands along the floor beside your legs and allow your chest to lie forwards onto the floor. Take hold of your feet if you can reach them. Aim for your body to be flat like a pancake.

Tips: Few bodies are made perfectly symmetrical, so differences between left and right are expected. Most people prefer to use one side of the body over the other for various activities – for example, you choose to kick a football with your right foot or play golf left handed – so through your stretching practice you will become more aware of these asymmetries within your own body.

Inner thigh
“adductor longus”
Half Pancake

**Stretches:**
Hip, groin, legs

**How to:** Start in a high kneeling position with one leg extended out to the side. Flex the foot and turn your leg outwards so the toes point up to the ceiling. This will encourage lengthening down the back of the leg.

Place your hands on the floor in front of you and begin to sit your bottom towards your heel. Slide your hands forwards, lower your head, and feel a lovely stretch down the inside thigh of the straight leg.

**Tips:** This is neither a regression nor progression from the pancake stretch. Doing a single-leg version allows you to focus all of your attention on one side, especially if you have noticed an asymmetry in the double-leg variation.
Revolved Crescent Lunge
Parivrtta Anjaneyasana

**Strengthens:**
Legs, hips, waist, shoulders

**Stretches:**
Legs, hips, waist, shoulders

→ **How to:** Begin by kneeling with your right leg forward, ensuring your hip, thigh, knee, shin, ankle and foot are pointing straight ahead. Lunge forward to extend the back hip and place the left hand alongside the inner arch of the front foot. Rotating your chest towards your knee, you can reach your free arm up to the ceiling to further rotate the chest and rib cage.

→ **Tips:** There are numerous modifications and variations of this stretch. Try any or all of the following:
- Lift your back knee to fully straighten your back leg
- Cross your front arm over the outside of your front leg
- Drop down on to your front elbow
- Anchor your bottom elbow over the outside of your front knee
Extended Side Angle
Utthita Parsvakonasana

Strengthens:
Legs, hips, waist

Stretches:
Legs, hips, waist, shoulders

→ How to: A very similar set up to the hip rotation stretch, except instead of twisting your chest towards the front leg, rotate your chest away, so you have the same hand as foot on the floor in front of you. Aim to sink your pelvis down to the floor, and to have a perfectly vertical alignment from the bottom hand, through your arms up towards the top hand.

→ Tips: This is a fabulous stretch for the psoas muscle, which attaches from the lower back down into the groin. The primary action of the psoas is to flex the hip, although when there is pain and dysfunction around the pelvis or lower back, the psoas can begin to act as an inefficient spinal stabilizer and lose its flexibility at the front of the hip.
Lying Hip Rotation

Strengthens: Waist

Stretches: Lower back, hips, legs, waist

→ How to: A simple and effective method of mobilising all the joints in the body from the waist down. Have your feet slightly wider than your hips, and take both legs over to one side. Further the stretch by feeling your knees reach away from you, promoting length along the thigh bones. Use your waistline muscles to rotate the pelvis and legs to the opposite side, continue rolling from left to right and feel the thigh bones swivelling in the hip sockets. This can also be done with the legs together to focus the rotation to the lower back.

→ Tips: For every moment of the day that we are upright, our bodies are constantly working hard to oppose the effect of gravity. When lying down, we place the body in a posture that is less affected by the force of gravity, so we instantly take a huge compressive force out of the joints. Mobilising the weight bearing joints in the lumbar spine and hips in this way is therefore most effective and relieving.
Pendulum

**Strengthens:**
Abdominals, waist, legs

**Stretches:**
Hamstrings, inside thighs

→ **How to:** A similar starting position to the lying hip rotation exercise, although the focus is now on abdominal strength and control. Lying on your back with your legs pointed up into the air, gently rock your pelvis from side to side, with your legs tilting from left to right like a pendulum. If you have tight hamstrings and are unable to fully straighten your legs, bend your knees to take the legs to a 90° angle. Focus on the movement being powered and controlled around your waist.

→ **Tips:** Joseph Pilates referred to the abdominal muscles as the ‘powerhouse’ of the body, where all movement started at the core and then flowed outwards to the limbs. There are several layers of abdominal muscles, with each playing their own role in supporting and moving the spine. Weaknesses in this stabilising system can result in spinal dysfunction and injury.
Piriformis Stretch

*Stretches:*
Deep external rotators of the hip

**How to:** Lie on your back and cross one ankle over the opposite knee, so your legs form a figure 4. Using your arms, pull your legs towards your chest to feel a deep stretch in the back of the hip. Sustain this stretch for up to 30 seconds, and repeat it several times on each leg for optimal benefit.

**Tips:** The piriformis is a deep muscle at the back of the hip joint, which connects from the sacrum to the thigh bone. The action of the muscle is to externally rotate your leg when standing tall, but also provide stability for your pelvis. In some people, the sciatic nerve actually pierces through the piriformis muscle belly, so if the piriformis is weak or tight, the sciatic nerve can become entrapped and lead to pain or numbness referring down the back of the leg.
As we get older, our balance tends to decline. Often we find ourselves avoiding certain situations where our balance may be challenged. You don’t need to drop into a deep lunge on one leg to practice your balance though. Try standing on one leg while brushing your teeth – it’s harder than it looks! A simple test for balance is to stand on one leg with your eyes closed. Can you stand steady for 30 seconds?

**How to:** Begin with your feet wide apart and hands clasped in front of you. Soften one knee and bend it outwards, lowering yourself into a deep side lunge. Try to keep the foot of the bent leg flat and grounded into the floor while the other foot flexes with the toes up to the ceiling. The pelvis should remain level with the sitting bones reaching for the floor. Balancing here may be challenging, so place your hands on the floor if necessary as you sink deeper into the stretch.

**Side Lunge**  
*Skandasana*

**Strengthens:**  
Abdominals, hips, legs

**Stretches:**  
Hips, legs

**Tips:** As we get older, our balance tends to decline. Often we find ourselves avoiding certain situations where our balance may be challenged. You don’t need to drop into a deep lunge on one leg to practice your balance though. Try standing on one leg while brushing your teeth – it’s harder than it looks! A simple test for balance is to stand on one leg with your eyes closed. Can you stand steady for 30 seconds?
Sky Squat Reach

**Strengthens:**
Abdominals, hips, legs

**Stretches:**
Hips, spine

→ **How to:** With your feet slightly wider than your hips, start with your legs turned out by externally rotating them within the hip joint. Bring your hands together in front of you and lower yourself into a deep squat. Aim for perfect symmetry between the legs and elongation throughout the spine. Your sitting bones should be reaching evenly to the floor. Add a chest rotation by reaching one arm towards the ceiling, opening across the chest and twisting through the ribs and waist.

→ **Tips:** Our hips and knee joints come equipped with large ranges of motion, allowing us to perform movements such as this deep squat. Children are able to sustain this position and play for long periods; it is a stable position with the centre of gravity low to the ground. As adults, we rarely access all of the available flexibility in these joints. When we only use a certain amount of movement, we develop stiffness and weakness.

**Inner thigh**
"adductor brevis"
Squatting Internal Rotation

Stretches: Abdominals, hips, legs

Stretches: Hips, spine

→ How to: Start in a similar way to the sky squat reach. Feel centered and evenly balanced in the deep squat. Release one heel from the floor so you’re able to pivot on the ball of the foot, to rotate the whole leg inwards from the hip joint. Try to find a freedom in the hip, knee and ankle that allows the leg to rotate without restriction, moving from one leg to the other.

Deep hip external rotator “inferior and superior gemelli”

→ Tips: The nature of the ball and socket joint of the hip means the thigh bone is free to move in all directions. In sports such as running and cycling, the hip joint only moves in one plane of movement: forward (flexion) and backward (extension). When doing cross-training, like a stretching or gym program, it’s good to include movements directed in other planes, such as internal and external rotation or abduction and adduction.
How to: Kneel on one knee with the other leg extended forward. Ensure the spine is kept elongated as you fold forward from the hip joint and lay your torso along the front leg. Avoid rounding the back or shoulders. Alternate between having the front foot flexing up to the ceiling and pointing down to the floor.

Tips: Muscles contain contractile fibres which change length when a muscle contracts and relaxes. This results in movement of the bones to which it attaches. It is possible to increase the resting length of a muscle and the flexibility throughout its range of movement via a combination of static and dynamic stretching and specific strengthening exercises. Nerves do not contain these contractile tissue fibres, so improving the mobility of a nerve involves ‘flossing’ the nerve along its pathway.
Tips: The pelvis is not a solid ring of bone, but rather a composition of two hemi-pelvises and your sacrum, with three joints connecting it all together. Like any joint in the body, there needs to be adequate mobility and stability for optimal function. This is particularly important around the pelvis, given the large load transference passing between the upper body and lower body with each step. Sometimes the sacroiliac joints (at the back) can become stiff and compressed, unstable or a combination of both.

How to: With the feet wide apart, rotate your legs outwards by externally rotating the feet. Fold forward from the hip and place your hands on the floor beneath you. Inhale to reach your bottom higher in the air, exhale to slide your hands to your feet. Grasp your arches with your hands and take your bottom towards the floor, bending your knees and pressing them out to the side with your arms. Allow your pelvis to sink into the pose, releasing tension from the lower back and hips. Think of your torso like a see-saw – as your tail gets lower to the ground, lift the chest higher.
Thoracic Rotation

Stretches:
Chest, spine, shoulders

Stretches:
Obliques

→ **How to:** Lying on your side with your head and neck supported, begin with your arms reaching forward. Slide your top hand along the bottom arm, across your chest, and eventually unfold the elbow to stretch the arm out long. You should feel a full rotation of your waist and trunk and a stretch from fingertip to fingertip. Aim to one day have your arms and upper back flat on the ground.

→ **Tips:** Often named ‘book openings’ or ‘chest openers’, this is a simple and effective way to relieve stress and tension from the neck, shoulders and upper back.

Chest
“pectoralis major”
Thoracic Extension

Stretches:
Arms, shoulders, spine

How to: Stand with your feet hip width apart and firmly ground your heels into the floor. Lean forward and place your hands on the wall at chest height, shoulder width apart. Inhale to prepare. As you exhale, sink your chest towards your toes with your head between your arms, as though you’ve been folded in half at the hip. Breathe deeply and continue to sink into the pose, feeling your upper back release and a deep pull down the back of your legs. Taking the elbows to the wall and interlacing your fingers behind your head will focus the stretch to the back of the arms.

Tips: The work of many professionals and students means long hours sitting. Achieving and sustaining the perfect posture for the entire work day is next to impossible, because our bodies are not designed to be sedentary for so long and our postural muscles eventually fatigue. The best approach is to constantly change a prolonged sitting posture to avoid muscle fatigue and the back and neck strain that this brings.
i stretch better