

# The Lazy Man's Guide to Stretching

## 15 minutes to (joint) freedom!

by Ian King

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If you're reading this article, I'm going to assume that you're interested enough in learning *how* to stretch, but not so much as to want to read a dissertation about *why* you should stretch. So I'm going to give you the Reader's Digest version of *why* before we get into the *how*.

When we popped out of Mommy, we were provided with a certain degree of flexibility (i.e. range of movement at the joint). But since then, most things that we've done in life have contributed to taking away what flexibility we started with. Understand this—training of any type potentially *shortens* connective tissue. It's not just the muscle length that determines flexibility, but *all* connective tissue, including ligaments, tendons, fascia, etc.

So why stretch? My number-one reason for stretching is to maintain a "specific joint relationship." Put simply, if the bones get drawn closer together than desirable, the impingement of connective tissue at the joint can cause all sorts of problems, especially nerve pinching. This can set off a range of neural activity, all the way from muscle spasms to feelings that the muscle has been torn. By stretching and keeping the joints healthy, you can continue to train. The two most critical joints are the hip joint (where the femur or upper leg meets the hipbone) and the shoulder (where the humerus or upper arm meets the shoulder joint).

My second reason for stretching is to allow you to obtain joint angles in your strength exercises that will provide greater training effects (more strength at specific joint angles and higher amounts of hypertrophy). Anyone wanting to confirm this theory just needs to have, say, a small muscle like the tibialis anterior (front shin muscle) loosened up. The immediate payoff, in most cases, will be an automatic increase in squat range. And if this doesn't increase your range of motion, bring in the big guns and extensively stretch the hip flexors, *then* squat. You'll immediately know what I'm speaking about from your own personal experience, which is much more valuable than just reading my opinion about it!

My third and final reason for stretching is to support and/or accelerate recovery.

Most of what I've said so far (nothing new or controversial) would be backed up by most "experts." So now let me run something by you that's less politically correct: I like *static* stretching. I know, I know...current trends in sport science have found favor in other methods, like *dynamic* stretching. But, in my opinion, it's all part of a circle that's slowly turning. Static stretching was the big hit in the '80s, and I suggest that it will be again.

But it gets worse—I believe in static stretching before the workout! How could I? Has my head been baking too long in the Australian sun? Don't I know that none of the "experts" support this, and neither does any of the "science?" Blah, blah, blah...

Here's my suggestion. Forget what you've heard or read. I'll have more respect for your opinion based on what it actually *did* for you, not what you *think* that it will do for you. Do the following stretching for, say, two to four weeks. After which, if you feel that it's reinforced all the negatives that you've heard about pre-training static stretching, great...stop doing it.

But, on the other hand, if—to your surprise—it actually does something positive for you, maybe you'll want to keep it going or even expand on it. That's okay, I won't mind if you remain a closet stretcher and continue to nod your head in agreement at seminars when all of the nasties about pre-training static stretching are rolled out.

Of course, you may not know the difference between static and dynamic stretching. Maybe you don't care, and the whole subject of stretching ranks right up there with the "history of napkins" as far as your interest levels are concerned. That's exactly why this program might be perfect for you.

What I've done is develop a pre-stretching program that takes 15 minutes or less. I suggest that you try it. If you can follow through for at least a couple of weeks, the benefits should easily outweigh any resistance on your part.

There's rationale to the order that I've laid out—it basically aims to reduce the limiting factor of the next subsequent stretch. For example, a tight neck (upper trap) can cause impingement symptoms through the shoulder joint, so loosening up the neck first will allow the muscles of the shoulder to "let go."

Focus on what you're doing, *feeling* for the stretch, relaxing into them. Go ahead, keep yourself mildly occupied while you're doing them. But if I had to pick between you checking out the T and A or chatting to your buddy, I'd opt for the T and A. Ideally, though, I'd like you to focus on what you're doing. If nothing else, the latter option (T and A) will negate the theory of "excessive lowering of neural arousal" that the anti pre-training static stretch people like to harp about. In other words, what goes up must come down and, therefore, what goes down (neural arousal during stretching) can also come up (during your specific warm-up sets).

### Stretches Before an Upper Body Workout

**Arms)** Using one arm at a time, and keeping the arm in line with the body, swing the arm in circles from front to back ten times, then back to front ten times. Do the same on the other side. If you have arthritic shoulders, you'll want to start the arm circles slowly and in smaller circles, progressing to a faster movement and bigger circles.

**Neck)** While standing, let one arm hang straight down. Turn the hand so that the palm faces the ceiling and the fingers point outward. Lean your head in the opposite direction of the aforementioned arm. Using the opposite arm, gently pull the top of your head further, actually

## *The lazy man's guide to stretching*

trying to take the ear to the shoulder. Then do the same in reverse on the other side. Repeat the process for the tightest side. You can also use this variation: pull the ear toward the *outer pec*, thereby stretching the broader, upper trap area.

**Shoulders)** There are three positions that I recommend for this old standby:

- 1) Stretch one arm up over the head, with the hand of the other arm pulling backward on the triceps just above the elbow, thereby stretching the tris, too.
  
- 2) Stretch one arm across the front of the chest, with the hand of the other arm pulling it in toward the body from that same leverage point on the tricep (just above the elbow), thereby stretching the posterior or rear of the shoulder and compressing the acromio-clavicular joint.
  
- 3) Stretch one arm up behind the body, with the hand of the other arm also behind the body pulling it up, thereby stretching the anterior or front of the shoulder.

Repeat the process for the other side.

**Forearms)** Place one arm straight in front of the body. Use the other hand to assist in creating the stretch. There are three positions that I recommend:

- 1) Starting with the palm facing away from you, as if you were a traffic cop, grab the fingers with your opposite hand and pull the hand toward the body, thereby stretching the forearm flexors.
  
- 2) Starting with the palm facing down (in the opposite position of the first step above), grab the fingers with your opposite hand and pull toward the body, thereby stretching the forearm extensors.
  
- 3) Starting with the palm facing down, rotate it outward, then upward so that the fingers end up pointing away from your body. Grab the back of the first hand with the palm of the other hand and pull the fingers around and up more, thereby stretching the forearm rotators.

**Chest)** Stand close to a vertical frame or door frame. Place one hand up on this frame. There are several positions that I recommend:

## *The lazy man's guide to stretching*

1) With the elbow bent to 90 degrees, the upper arm parallel to the ground, and the lower arm in contact with the vertical frame, *rotate the body away*. This should provide a very isolated chest stretch.

2) Now, move a bit further away from the frame and extend the arm until the elbow is just slightly bent. With the hand and/or wrist in contact with the frame and the palm facing forward, *rotate the body away*. This is still a strong stretch for the chest, but you'll also be able to feel it in the biceps.

3) Move a little further from the wall again and straighten the arm out completely. With the hand and/or wrist still in contact with the frame and the palm facing forward, *rotate away*. This will increase the stretch in the biceps and/or forearm.

For yet another position, keep the arm straight as in the last step and with the hand and/or wrist still in contact with the frame, rotate the forearm by taking the palm down and stretching it to the rear. Then, *rotate away*. This will also take the stretch into the forearm extensors.

**Lats)** Stand under a horizontal frame such as a chin bar, but make sure that your feet can still touch the ground if you grab onto the bar. Hold onto the bar above you with one arm at a time, lowering your body *down* and pushing the pelvis in the *opposite direction*.

Stand in front of a vertical frame, grasp it with one hand, and lean forward. The upper body should be basically parallel to the ground now. Rotate the hips away from the stretch side. This will stretch the lats and upper back.

### **Stretches Before a Lower Body Workout**

**Calfs)** Assume the position shown in the photo and place one foot flat on the ground. Keep the knee of that leg straight. While making sure to maintain heel contact with the ground, lower your upper body slowly to accentuate the stretch.

Keeping the same position, bend the stretch-side leg at the knee. This second position will shift the stretch lower, toward the heel.

**Lower back)** Lie on your back on the ground. There are a few positions that I recommend for this stretch, but only go beyond the first position if your back hasn't had any recent trauma:

1) Bring your knees to your chest, pulling them into the chest by levering your arms under the knee joint. Rock gently.

## *The lazy man's guide to stretching*

2) Now, extend the legs until they are straight and slowly take the legs over the head as far as you can comfortably go—if you feel this more in the upper back or neck, be sensible about how far you take the stretch.

3) Bend the knees, looking to take the knees toward the ground on either side of the ears. However far you get, be careful and slow in coming out.

**Hamstrings)** While still on your back, there are a few positions that you can employ:

1) Using your towel as a stirrup under one foot, keep the leg straight and take it up as high as hamstring flexibility allows.

2) Now, drop the towel. Bend the leg and, locking your hands around your ankles, bring the slightly bent knee as close to the chest as you can.

3) Place the opposite-side arm under the knee joint (left arm under the right knee joint) and pull the knee as close to the body as you can. Simultaneously, use the other hand to pull the heel as close to the shoulders as you can.

**Gluteals)** While still on your back, there are a few positions that you can employ:

1) Lift one leg. Bend it at the knee across your body and, grasping the foot with the opposite-side hand, pull the foot toward the head. Place the same-side hand on the bent knee and push the knee away.

2) Take the same foot across to the opposite hip and hold it there with the opposite-side hand. Use the other hand to pull the knee across your body toward the opposite shoulder. Raise the non-stretching leg (for the sake of this example, we'll call it the left leg) up so that the calf of the right leg is touching the quad of the left leg. Put your left arm through the "D" shape formed by both legs (through the hole) and grab onto the inside of the left leg, just below the kneecap. With the right hand, grab onto the shin of the leg and use both hands to pull the left leg up toward the chest.

1) Lift one leg straight up into the air, then lower it down over the other side of the body. Keep the leg straight. Your degree of flexibility will determine what angle (relative to the body) it goes down. Progressively lift the leg up toward the head, keeping it straight.

## *The lazy man's guide to stretching*

2) Now, bend the stretch-side leg, pulling the bent knee down to the ground using the opposite-side hand.

**Hip flexors/quads)** Kneel on the ground just in front of—and facing away from—a low bench. Place a rolled up towel under the knee as a cushion. The leg to be stretched first has the knee bent with the knee on the towel. The foot is placed on the bench behind you:

1) The first position requires you to lower your bum toward the stretch-side heel. If this is easy, add the pelvic tilt—"suck" the top of the pelvis in or backward, and push the bottom end of the pelvis forward.

2) Now, take the foot of the non-stretching leg out further away from the bench, put your hands on your head, and lower your pelvis down as low as it can go. Your stretch-side foot should still be on the bench behind you.

The lower body stretches will probably take you a bit longer to perform than the upper body stretches.

### **Notes**

The stretching sessions are planned to take 15 minutes or less, and I recommend a short (5-10 minutes) jaunt on the stationary bike, or similar, prior to at least the lower body stretches. Keep the following in mind, though, as you do these movements:

- When you figure out which side is tighter, always work that one first.
- Repeat the stretches for the tighter side again. The order will go tighter side, looser side, tighter side.
- Hold each stretch for 10-30 seconds, depending on your motivation.
- As you motivation rises, look to hold each stretch longer and/or increase the number of repeats.

I hope that I've convinced you to give this program a go. I guarantee that you won't be sorry, and you'll see the results in as little as two to four weeks.

Ian has produced a three-part video series on stretching that's available for \$97 AU, or about \$61 US. Each video can also be purchased individually. Part I is an introduction that offers some background on Ian's approach to stretching. Part II (individual stretches) and Part III (paired stretches) are designed to allow you to put them in your video player and simply follow along, just as if Ian was giving you personal instruction.

Send an email to [kingsports@b022.aone.net.au](mailto:kingsports@b022.aone.net.au) to order the Ian King videos or to obtain more information.

