

Flexibility Exercises

Joint stiffness and loss of flexibility is a common cause of neck and back pain. Therefore, flexibility exercises are important for many. If a joint or muscle is stiff, pain will be felt as the limit of range of motion. This is not the case when a muscle or joint has normal flexibility. Therefore, one of the signs of joint or muscle stiffness is limited range of movement and pain at the end of the range.

"A good rule of thumb" is this: If you have limited movement and some stiffness is felt at the end of that movement, you will need to do flexibility exercises. If you seem to have full movement and no stiffness is felt, you probably do not need to do that particular flexibility exercise.

It is important to follow this rule because it is possible to be too flexible. Joints and muscles can be overstretched. Unfortunately, some athletes and exercise fanatics spend too much effort stretching. Weakened joints and muscles are the result. If you are not sure which exercises you should do, or how vigorous you should be, your physical therapist or doctor can advise you.

The following flexibility exercises for the neck and upper back should first be done as a test. If you feel stiffness as you do certain exercises, you will want to include these in your regular exercise program.

Forward head, slumped sitting posture involves rounding of the shoulders and upper back. The muscles and ligaments in the front of the chest and shoulders may become tight with this type of posture.

Corner Stretch

This exercise stretches the chest and shoulder muscles and ligaments. It should be held at least 15 to 20 seconds. Repeat the exercise a few times with hands at different heights until you feel you have gained flexibility.

Wall Stretch

The wall stretch is done by standing with your back against the wall as you turn your arms out and raise overhead. Keep upper arms and body in contact with the wall as you do this exercise.

Towel Stretch

Another chest and shoulder stretch is done by lying over a towel roll. You may maintain this type of stretch for 3 to 5 minutes.

Head Back, Chin In Exercise

The head back, chin in, exercise is excellent for stretching tight muscles and ligaments in the back of the neck. Initially, the exercise can be done lying down... and advanced to the sitting or standing position as you make progress. If you work with your head and neck in a forward bent position it is good to do this exercise frequently to relieve stress and tension.

Backward Bending with Chin Tuck Exercise

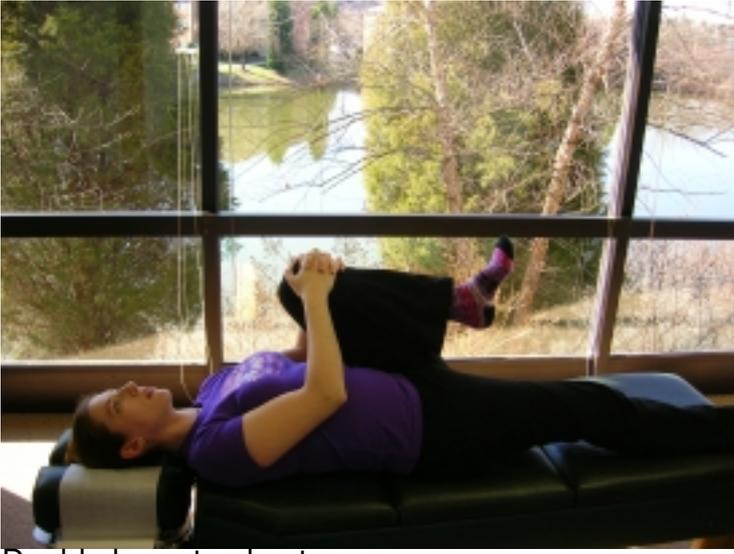
Backward bending of the neck and upper back is especially helpful if you feel stiffness across the upper back and base of the neck. Start doing this exercise lying down, lowering the head slowly with your hand... and progress to the sitting position as you become more advanced. This is another excellent exercise for you to do frequently throughout the day if the forward bent head and neck position is a necessary part of your work. To concentrate the stretch to the upper back and lower neck, only do it with a chin tuck.

Exercises to Increase Forward Bending Flexibility - Lower Back

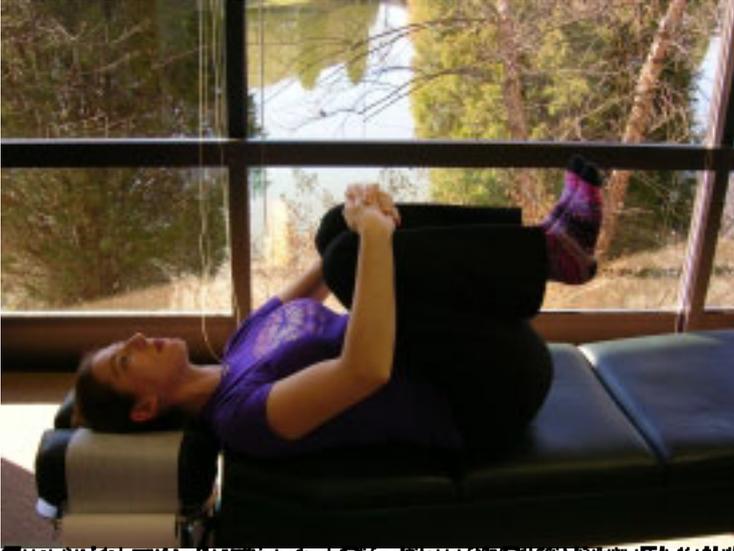
If you have an excess curve in your low back (sway back) and your back is stiff when you try to forward bend, you will benefit from exercises that stretch the low back muscles.

The exercises that stretch the lower back muscles are the single and double knee-to-chest exercises shown here. Single knee-to-chest exercises are done alternately. You should hold ten to fifteen seconds with the knee flexed as close to the chest as possible. The double knee-to-chest exercise is also done with a five to ten second hold. One should do ten to fifteen of each of these as often as necessary to keep the back flexible. This exercise may aggravate a disc strain or bulge and should not be done if such a condition is present.

Single knee-to-chest:



Double knee to chest:



Half way up backwards bending stretch:



Full backwards bending stretch:



Figure 1. Full backwards bending stretch. Figure 2. Full backwards bending stretch.



Single leg stretch:



Neutral hip flexor stretch:



Hip flexor full stretch:



Right knee on floor, left knee on mat, right foot flat on floor, left hand on floor, right hand on thigh, torso upright, head up, eyes forward, breathe in and out, hold for 30 seconds, repeat on other side.



Repeat the stretch on the opposite side. Repeat the stretch on the opposite side.



Repeat the stretch on the opposite side. Repeat the stretch on the opposite side.



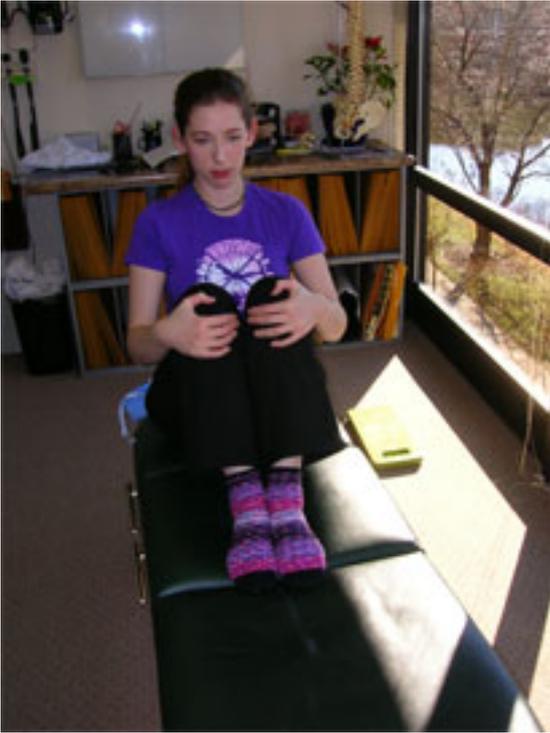
Trunk rotation stretch to the right:



Full trunk rotation stretch:



How to perform this stretch: Lie on your back on the table with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor. Turn your feet and knees towards the right side of the table.



Thigh muscle stretch:

