Stretching lower limb muscles

This leaflet gives advice about stretching lower limb muscles. If you have any further questions, please speak to the podiatrist caring for you.

Stretching is important in the treatment and prevention of a number of foot and lower limb conditions. In this leaflet there are a number of stretches that we recommend to our patients.

How to stretch
The stretching technique varies depending on the muscle being stretched. Here are some points to remember when performing any stretching exercise.

- Hold each stretch for at least 30 seconds and repeat three times on each leg, 2-3 times throughout the day
- Move in to the stretch slowly and don’t over extend yourself.
- Maintain controlled breathing throughout the stretch.
- While you are stretching, try and keep your head up and back straight. This will encourage correct posture and lower the risk of injury
- Avoid bouncing during the stretch. Bouncing can cause microtears in the muscle that can lead to injury.
- You should feel a slight pull in the muscle, but no pain. If you start to feel pain while you stretch, release your stretch slightly so that you feel a stretch, but no pain.

Caution: As with any activity, if these exercises/stretches cause pain, tingling or numbness, stop the activity and let your podiatrist or health professional know as soon as possible.

Standing stretches – Lower leg
Upper calf (gastrocnemius)
1. Stand facing a wall, about 1 metre away.
2. Place your right leg behind you (feet facing forwards).
3. Push your right heel into the floor keeping your leg straight.
4. Lean forward bending your left leg. You should feel the stretch in your calf.
5. Repeat on left leg.

Lower calf (soleus)
Repeat the upper calf stretch with the back knee bent, making sure the back heel stays on the ground. You will feel the stretch slightly in your calf.
Standing stretches – Upper leg

Front of thighs (quadriceps)
1. Stand facing a wall, about 1 metre away.
2. Hold your right foot behind you with your right hand.
3. Push your hips forward, and keep your knees together if possible. (If you can’t hold your foot, place it on a chair with the hip pushed forward and knees together). You will feel the stretch in the front of your thigh.
4. Hold for 30 seconds and repeat exercise on the left leg.

Back of thighs (hamstrings)
1. Use a stair so that you can support yourself on the hand rail.
2. Place your right heel on the step with your toes up.
3. Bend your left leg, pushing your bottom out and up. You should feel the stretch in the back of your thigh.
4. Hold for 30 seconds and repeat the exercise on your left leg.

Inner thigh
1. Take a wide side step with right foot, landing in ‘10 to 2’ position.
2. Move your left foot to face forwards, and bend your right knee and lean to the right. You should feel the stretch in your left thigh. Make sure your left foot stays flat on the floor.
3. Hold for 30 seconds and repeat the exercise on the left leg.

Floor stretches

Upper calf (gastroc)
1. First thing in the morning, sit with your legs straight in front of you.
2. Loop a towel under the ball of your foot.
3. Flex your foot up and pull towards you with the towel.
4. Hold for 30 seconds and release.
5. Repeat on your other foot.

Hip flexors
1. Kneel on your left knee with your right foot out in front.
2. Ease your hips forward.
3. Hold for 30 seconds and release.
4. Repeat on other leg.

Back of thigh (hamstrings)
1. Lie on your back.
2. Lift your right leg up bent at knee, then straighten the leg if possible.
3. Ease your leg towards your body, using your hands, towel or shoe laces.
4. Turn heel inwards to stretch inner hamstrings.
5. Turn heel outwards to stretch outer hamstrings.
6. Hold each stretch for 30 seconds and release.
7. Repeat on your left leg.
Outer hip (glutes) and lower back
1. Lie on your back.
2. Bend your right knee into chest.
3. Place your left hand on outside of right knee.
4. Place right arm out to side, palm down.
5. Carefully move right knee across your body towards your left side and touch the floor keeping both shoulders on ground.
6. Hold each stretch for 30 seconds and release.
7. Repeat on your left leg.

What conditions do stretches help with?
Usually stretching programs are used in combination with strengthening programs for a wider range of musculoskeletal conditions.

Is there anything I can do to help myself?

Lifestyle changes
If you are overweight, losing weight will help as it will reduce the amount of load going through the Achilles tendon as you walk. If you think you need more help with weight loss, please discuss this with your podiatrist or GP.

Exercise and physical activity
It is important to be physically active to improve cardiovascular (heart and breathing) and muscular fitness as well as bone health. The World Health Organization recommends adults complete 2 ½ hours of moderate intensity aerobic exercise, and a form of strength training twice each week, such as Pilates, tai chi or weight lifting.

Useful sources of information
Versus Arthritis (formerly Arthritis Research UK), w: www.versusarthritis.org/about-arthritis/conditions/foot-and-ankle-pain/
The College of Podiatry, w: www.cop.org.uk/
World Health Organisation, w: www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/factsheet_adults/en/

Contact us
If you have any questions or concerns, please contact us, t: 020 3049 7900, Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm. For emergencies outside these hours contact your local Emergency Department (A&E).

For more information on our service including clinic locations please visit, w: www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/our-services/community-podiatry

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit w: www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets

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