



Head, shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes ...

The American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) says that **stretching for 10 minutes just two days a week can help increase flexibility in the muscles and range of motion in the joints.**

You can find many variations on types of stretches online. ACSM recommends that most people should perform stretching exercises for each major muscle-tendon group.

This includes:

- Shoulders
- Chest
- Neck
- Torso
- Lower back
- Hips
- Front of legs
- Back of legs
- Ankles

Proper stretching techniques

Use the following guidelines to begin your stretching routine.

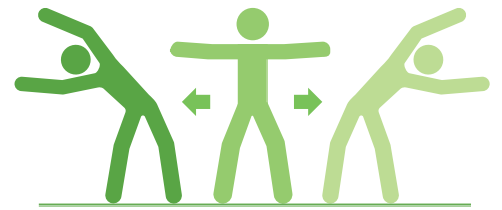
DO: Warm your muscles up first. Flexibility exercises are much more effective when your muscles are warm. If you're doing a cardio or resistance workout, do that first; then move to your stretching exercises. If you're not doing a routine exercise such as cardio or resistance, you can take a quick walk while gently pumping your arms. That's enough to get your muscles ready for a good stretch.

DO: Hold your stretches for 10 to 30 seconds. This will provide enough time for your muscles and tissues to lengthen safely. Repeat the stretch until each muscle group has had at least 60 seconds of stretch.

DON'T: Bounce. Instead, slowly stretch the muscle for the time allotted. Bouncing while stretching a muscle can cause small tears in it. As those tears heal, they will leave scar tissue, which will actually tighten the muscle further. This will result in less flexibility!

DON'T: Stretch to the point of pain. Your aim is to feel your muscle lengthen as you stretch. You will feel tension, but if you begin to feel pain, you've gone too far.

DON'T: Hold your breath. If you do, you're depriving your muscles of oxygen in your blood. When that happens, your body will build lactic acid in the muscle, which could result in pain. So make sure to relax and breathe as you stretch.



DO: Stretch both sides of your body. You want your range of motion to be balanced on either side of your body.



A word of caution

If you need help determining which types of stretching exercises are right for you, talk to your doctor. They may offer advice or refer you to a physical therapist. Most important, if you're recovering from an injury, such as a sprained joint, broken bone or acute muscle strain, always consult a doctor or physical therapist before beginning any stretching routine.