



Stretching

Why stretch?

Stretching before and after exercise is very important for all runners. The benefits from stretching are that you may prevent injury, bring the shortened muscles back to their original length, and to reduce or avoid post exercise stiffness. When you stretch you are trying to increase the range of movement around a joint or a group of joints. This helps to strengthen the joint and to increase the flow of blood into the muscles around the joint.

Before exercise, in the warm-up, you want to prepare the muscle for activity. The best time to stretch is just after a short easy jog and to hold each stretch for 10 seconds. It is especially important if you intend to start an intense activity such as sprinting or speed-work.

After exercise, in the cool-down, you want to bring back the muscles used to their original length. During activity the muscle shortens, you notice this when the muscle gets tight and hard. To reduce or even prevent post exercise muscle stiff-ness you are now trying to lengthen and loosen the muscle back to its pre-exercise level. You should hold the stretch for longer - 30 seconds.

Below are stretches we recommend you as a minimum do before and after running. There are many more good stretches but these five exercises will be a good start to prevent you from getting injured.

Ten tips on how to stretch

1. Don't stretch cold muscles. It's far better to stretch after a run than before.
2. Move slowly into the stretch. Hold the stretch for 10 seconds prior to exercise (warm-up) and for 30 seconds post exercise (cool-down).
3. Breathe and relax while holding the stretch.
4. NEVER do any bouncy stretching, always hold and relax.
5. Focus on the muscle you are trying to stretch and then try to lengthen it.
6. You may be able to breach in and push the stretch slightly further half way through the stretch. This is most important during cool-down.
7. Move slowly out of the stretch again.
8. Remember to stretch both sides.
9. Increasing the range of movement around a joint will help the blood flow to the muscles surrounding the joint and increase circulation that will carry away any lactic acids that may build up in the muscle.
10. Do more stretching than just warm-up and cool-down. A lot of gyms offer stretch-classes where the aim is to permanently and progressively to increase your flexibility.

Leigh-on-Sea Striders



Stretching

5 essential stretches

Calf - Gastrocnemius

Step one foot a large step in front of the other
Feet parallel, pointing forward
Back heel flat on the ground
Hands on the front bend knee
Back straight and head slightly down
FEEL the stretch in the calf of the back leg



Lower calf - Soleus

One foot in front of the other, small step
Weight on the back leg
Feet parallel, toes pointing forward
Both heels down
FEEL the stretch in the lower calf of the back leg



Hamstrings

One foot in front of the other, a small step apart
Sit back on the back leg (weight on the back leg)
Stretch front leg (flex foot upwards for extra resistance)
Lift your buttocks
Hands on bend leg
Stomach in, head lifted and back straight
FEEL the stretch in the straight leg - just below your buttocks



Quadriceps and Hip-flexors

Back straight
Stomach in
Supporting leg soft (slightly bend)
Push bend foot into your hand at the ankle - Not your toe
Use a wall or partner for balance
FEEL the stretch in the quad (hip) of your bend leg and try to move the muscle out for extra flexibility



Iliotibial Band

Cross feet by taking one foot in front of the other (the right foot in front)
Find your balance and keep your back straight
Front leg slightly bend
Push left hip slightly left, away from the centre of you body
Hands along side of your body
FEEL the stretch on the outside of your left leg





Stretching

Further Stretching

1. Lying hamstring stretch with cord

Keep your upper body relaxed and both legs straight as you pull one leg towards you. A variation: lying as before, bend the upper knee in towards your chest. Holding the cord around the foot of the bent leg, push away with the foot, trying to straighten the leg against the tension of the cord. You should feel the stretch higher up the hamstring.



2. Lying gluteal stretch against wall

Keep the ankle of your front leg just below your knee and ensure that you're close enough to the wall for your lower back to be off the floor. As gravity gently brings your lower back towards the floor, you'll feel a stretch in the muscles around the side of your buttocks. Adjust the angle of your hips and front knee to intensify the stretch.



3. Groin stretch

Hold your feet and gently use your leg muscles to move your knees towards the ground. Keeping a straight back and bringing your feet closer to your body intensifies the stretch.



4. Gastrocnemius (upper calf) stretch

Keep the back leg straight and push the back heel into the ground. Keeping a straight upper body and gently lifting up your hips helps. There shouldn't be much pressure on the front foot.



5. Soleus (lower calf) stretch

Stand closer to the wall and bend one leg, keeping the foot flat on the floor. You should feel a stretch in your lower calf. Leaning towards the wall intensifies the stretch; there should be little pressure on the other foot.



6. Iliotibial band stretch

Place one foot around the other, with both feet flat on the ground. Keeping both legs straight, lean your hips towards the side of your rearmost foot (so, if your right foot is rearmost, lean your hips to the right). You should feel the stretch down the outside of your leg and around your hip - if you are very stiff, it may take a few times before you feel anything.



7. Hip flexor stretch

Keep your hips squared forwards and your upper body vertical; slumping forwards reduces the stretch.



8. Standing quadriceps stretch

Flex your foot and keep your body straight to maximise the stretch through the front of your leg. You can put one hand on a wall if you need balance.





If you're comfortable with the basic stretches, try these more advanced alternatives.

1. Kneeling quadriceps stretch against wall

Your rearmost shin and the top of your foot should be flat against the wall, as you lean back to increase the stretch in the front of your thigh. Take care if you have ankle problems, and stay tall in your upper body to avoid compressing your lower back.



2. Bent-leg standing hamstrings stretch

Be thoroughly warmed up before you attempt this one. With one foot on a chair or ledge, bend your upper leg deeply and move your chest down onto your thigh. Keeping your chest low, gently try to straighten your bent leg.



3. Cross-legged sitting gluteals stretch

Start in a cross-legged position with your back upright. Your shins should be parallel to your body and your feet should be as far out to the sides as you can get them. Keeping a straight back, bend forwards with arms outstretched.

