



Flex Time

4 stretches you can do anytime, anywhere

BY KAITLYN PIRIE



EXTENDED SIDE ANGLE

Boosts energy

Stand with feet together. Step left foot back several feet and turn it out 45 degrees. Bend right knee into a deep lunge, reach right hand toward the floor (or rest forearm on thigh) and extend left arm upward. Hold for five to eight breaths, then repeat on the opposite side. Opens up inner thighs, outer hips, waist and shoulders.

PIGEON

Relieves tension

Start on all fours. Bring right leg forward and place knee on the floor between hands, then sit down and extend your left leg straight back behind you. Try to keep right shin on the floor as you lengthen left thigh. Level hips so they're even and walk hands forward. Hold for five to eight breaths, then repeat on the opposite side. Opens up hips and lower back.



Stretching: The Rules

Kristin McGee shares her secrets to making the most of any flexibility move.



DON'T PUSH IT

A stretch might be uncomfortable but it shouldn't be painful. If it is, you're either going too far or not doing it properly.



HOLD IT

Your muscle needs to hold a static stretch to reap the benefits, so aim for 30 to 50 seconds.



DON'T BOUNCE

It's not very effective and could lead to overstretching. You're better off settling into position and going a little deeper each time you exhale.



MAKE IT A HABIT

A big lapse in practice can bring you back to square one. Aim for at least 10 minutes (say, first thing in the morning or during your lunch break) three to four times a week.



STRAIGHTEN UP

Instead of rounding your back when you bend forward, lift up out of your sit bone or you'll miss out on the perks for your lower back and hamstrings.



For a longer stretching routine from Kristin McGee with four extra poses, visit familycircle.com/yoga-poses.



LOW LUNGE

Improves balance

Kneel down, then step right foot forward so knee forms a 90-degree angle. Lift hands up to the sky, and bend upper back slightly backward. Hold for five to eight breaths, then repeat on the opposite side. Opens up hip flexors, chest, back and front.

UPWARD-FACING DOG

Enhances posture

Start in plank position. Press the top of each foot into the floor as you lower hips and arch upper back, hovering just above the ground. Engage your core and press firmly into hands and feet. Opens up chest, arms, back and hip flexors.



Stretching: The Truth

Don't believe these myths about flexibility.

MYTH

It's not important unless you're a gymnast.

FACT

Without flexibility, your risk of getting hurt skyrockets. "When joints are stiff, you lack the range of motion to move freely with ease, and any stress on those joints and ligaments can lead to injury," says McGee. "Simple movements like opening a door can cause strains or tears." Even athletes are susceptible—runners and skiers tend to blow out their knees when they don't stretch enough.

MYTH

It's something you have to be born with.

FACT

"That's like saying someone is born strong. But in reality, people lift weights to build muscles," says McGee. Although we do have an innate amount of flexibility, research shows it's malleable and we can improve it. "Every person can find their range of motion and gain flexibility through

stretching," says McGee. She likens stretching to adding grease to a squeaky door hinge. "With a little WD-40, the door opens a lot easier and more fluidly. But if you try to pull it open without greasing the hinges, you risk breaking it." Stretching allows your muscles and joints to work more efficiently.

MYTH

It's just a matter of touching your toes.

FACT

There's a lot more to stretching than forward bends. Make the most of your flexibility by engaging in two types of stretching: static (like the aforementioned toe-touching) and dynamic (like sun salutations done at the beginning of yoga class). Dynamic stretches are a great way to start your workout because they involve movement—and then you can engage in traditional poses later in your routine. "You want to open up your body and get blood flowing first," says McGee. "Someone who isn't warmed up or aware of their body could tear a ligament or damage muscles in a static stretch."

Kristin McGee is a celebrity yoga and Pilates instructor and the author of *Chair Yoga*.