Stretch Your Way to Proper Body Alignment

"To live a long, active, energetic life, few things matter more than good posture" - American Journal of Pain Management

Improving your posture can help build self-esteem, radiate confidence, make better first impressions - and for all you gym-lovers out there - make your workouts more efficient!

Americans spend an average of eight to ten hours a day at work - during this time we often adopt unconscious and improper body positions and engage in repetitive movements which create muscle imbalances. Imagine the postural imbalances of a teacher who stands in front of a class all day, or a dentist who leans over to treat patients day after day. Spending close to fifty hours per week in unnatural body positions takes its toll on the body. But if we became more conscious about our bodies and integrated daily flexibility training could we recover from our improper habitual positions and could we avoid chronic pain from poor alignment?

Here are four of the best stretches for proper body alignment, improved function and more efficient workouts at the gym….

1. Hip flexor Stretch

Too much sitting, too much walking….your hip flexors are bound to get tight. The key to an effective hip flexor stretch is making sure your pelvis stays tucked under. Since tight hip flexors cause an anterior pelvic tilt the trick is to do the opposite movement. Kneeling on one leg, tuck the pelvis under in a posterior tilt, engage your lower abdominals and slowly bring your chin to your chest. You should feel a stretch in the front of your hip.

2. Tensor Fascia Latae Stretch

No - this isn’t a cup of coffee but rather a hip flexing, leg abducting, internally-rotating muscle on our upper hip. This muscle also plays a role in knee stabilization as its fibers (along with gluteus maximus fibers) insert into the IT Band. Since this muscle acts on both the hip and the knee joint - this also means that if this muscle is too tight it can cause both a hip and knee imbalance.

To stretch the TFL you want to stand in a lunge position, lifting both arms above the head, grab the elbow of the arm on same side as back leg. Engaging the back leg glutes, slowly lean the body towards the front leg. You should feel a gentle stretch in the outside of the back hip.
3. Quadratus Lumborum Stretch

If we can have a favorite muscle, this is probably one of mine. This seemingly simple muscle plays an important role in trunk/hip mobility giving strength to many of the dynamic movements of a martial artist, gymnast, dancer…. on the flip side this muscle is rarely stretched in the typical gym setting and is responsible for imbalanced hips, knee pain and foot pain. The interconnection between the foot, knees and hips is quite fascinating so we cannot neglect these smaller trunk muscles when stretching!

To stretch the quadratus lumborum, sit with one leg extended out to the side and the opposite leg tucked in (if this bothers the knee, both legs can be extended out into a straddle position). Using a towel or yoga strap, place it around the ball of the foot on the extended leg. Gently rotate the trunk and lower the torso towards the extended leg. You should feel a gentle stretch in the lower back.

4. Gastrocs baby!

A Podiatrist’s favorite muscle….or maybe I should say never ending headache. The gastrocnemius/soleus complex is both a postural muscle (which means it is in a continuous tonic contraction when standing long hours – think teacher) as well as a propulsion/power muscle. The gastrocnemius muscle is unique in that it attaches above the knee joint - so all those hours sitting in a chair with your knees bent are going to tighten this muscle right up! The deforming force of a tight posterior group can lead to imbalance body biomechanics starting from foot – and up to knee and hip. So try to make gastroc/soleus stretching part of your client’s daily routine.

From the downward dog to dropping a heel off a step, there are many ways to stretch the calves. The above example is an effective way to get a calves stretch by actively engaging your tibialis anterior muscle when you flex your foot back (this is a good trick to get a deeper stretch in the calves). If you cannot reach your toes, you can use a towel or belt around the balls of your feet pulling straight back. Just remember to keep your back flat as you do this stretch to avoid unnecessary strain on the lower back.

In closing, remember the key to a great stretch is holding 20-30 seconds, relax then repeating another 20-30 seconds for a total of 5 times

For more great stretches and tips for proper body alignment try the VCore Workout www.vcoreworkout.com Where we focus on BODY ALIGNMENT from the foot up!

Happy stretching!

Dr. Emily Splichal, DPM, MS, CPT

Creator of VCore® Workout
Founder of Evidence Based Fitness Academy