

Gentle Moves

15 REJUVENATING
STRETCHES TO EASE
EVERYDAY ACHES AND PAINS

BY ANDREA FERRETTI

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
THE ELLAPHANT IN THE ROOM



1. HALF DOWNWARD-FACING DOG

HOW IT HELPS: Opens chest and keeps shoulders back to eliminate the hunched-over posture that causes neck and lower-back pain

TRY IT: Place palms at midrib height on a wall. Inhale. As you exhale, bend knees slightly and slowly walk feet back until arms are straight and back is parallel to floor. Pressing hands into wall, draw belly button toward spine and allow chest to drop. Hold for 10 deep breaths.

Dealing with achy joints doesn't have to be part of getting older. By improving your posture and doing gentle exercises to strengthen muscles that support your joints, you can avoid becoming one of the 100 million American adults who live with chronic pain.

Years of hunching over puts pressure on the soft disks between vertebrae, and tissues that surround joints lose elasticity as we age. But these changes can be remedied, says Steven E. Sampson, a sports medicine physician at Ortho-Healing Center in Los Angeles. "Stretching improves blood flow to muscles and tendons, which can tighten with inactivity," he says. "Strengthening the muscles around our joints helps alleviate stress and inflammation."

These simple moves can be done almost anywhere with minimal equipment—work them into your day three times a week to ease aches or head them off before they begin.

UPPER-BODY MOVES

Daily activities like sitting, driving, and using the phone set us up for poor posture. “When we lose alignment in our upper back, the chest muscles get tight, the muscles across the upper back get stretched and weak, and the scapulas move out of position,” says Harvey Deutch, a physical therapist and owner of Red Hawk Physical Therapy in San Francisco. This forces the muscles in your neck and shoulders to work harder to support your head.

The stretch on the previous page and the four shown here improve your posture by strengthening the posterior muscles that pull your shoulders back and open your chest.



2. SHOULDER OPENER WITH STRAP

HOW IT HELPS: Stretches chest and shoulders

TRY IT: Hold yoga strap (or belt) with 1 hand at each end, arms held straight out in front at shoulder height, hands wider than shoulders. Keeping arms straight, inhale and reach arms overhead. Exhale and lower arms behind head as far as possible. Inhale, bringing arms up, then exhale and lower them to starting position. Repeat 5 times.



Squeeze your shoulder blades together to open your chest.

3. SCAPULAR PUSH-UP

HOW IT HELPS: Strengthens muscles connecting the sides of your ribs to your shoulder blades. When these are strong, your shoulders naturally pull back to prevent rounding of your back.

TRY IT: Get on all fours. Keep arms straight and hands directly underneath shoulders. Engage abdominal muscles and squeeze shoulder blades together. Hold 1 second, then release to return to starting position. Do 10 repetitions.

4. NECK RELEASE

HOW IT HELPS: Massages neck and creates space between the disks, relieving pressure

TRY IT: Put 2 tennis balls in a sock, knot open end, and place on yoga block (or thick book). Lie on back and rest neck on balls. Lift chin and then tuck it, rolling neck muscles along balls. Tucking chin will open spaces between neck vertebrae. Hold tuck for 10 deep breaths.



5. UPPER-BACK RELEASE

HOW IT HELPS: Rolling on a ball provides a self-massage for your upper back, releasing tension in muscles and fascia, the connective tissue just beneath your skin.

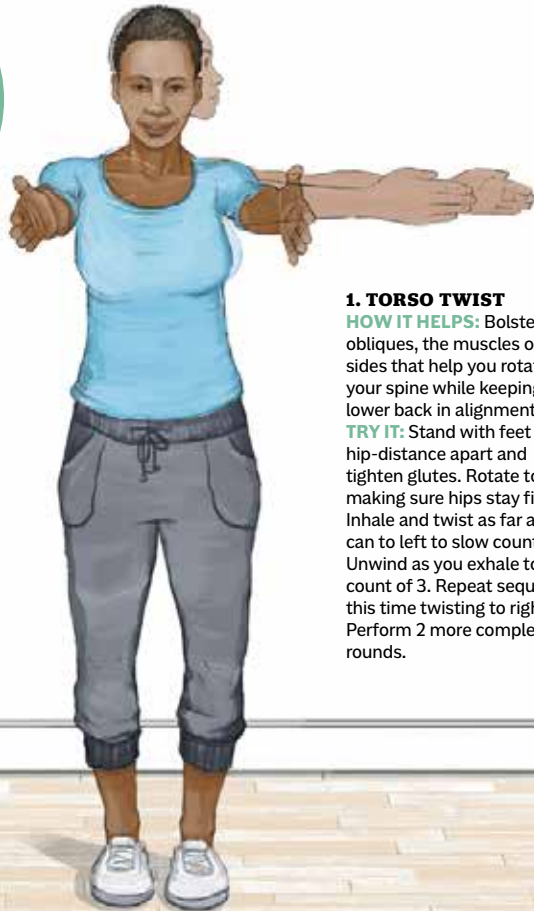
TRY IT: Stand with back to wall. Place tennis ball between upper back and wall to right of spine. Gently rock ball out and back from spine, allowing ball to move down back to bottom of rib cage. Place ball on left side of spine and repeat.

Rock the ball from side to side and allow it to roll down your back.

CORE MOVES

Your core is made up of the muscles at the front, back, and sides of your lower torso, including your hips. A strong and flexible core is the foundation of a healthy lower back. The ideal alignment for your lower back is a gentle forward arch. If your core is tight or weak, that curve will become either flat or overarched, causing pain in your lower back, hips, butt muscles (glutes), or all three areas, says Jill Miller, cofounder of Tune Up Fitness Worldwide.

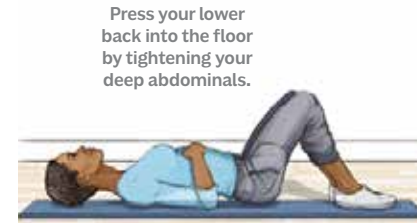
If you sit for hours each day, you can bet your hip flexors need stretching. This set of exercises works the core muscles as well as the hip flexors, which help you lift your legs. The final move helps strengthen your spine.



1. TORSO TWIST

HOW IT HELPS: Bolsters obliques, the muscles on your sides that help you rotate your spine while keeping your lower back in alignment

TRY IT: Stand with feet hip-distance apart and tighten glutes. Rotate torso, making sure hips stay fixed. Inhale and twist as far as you can to left to slow count of 3. Unwind as you exhale to slow count of 3. Repeat sequence, this time twisting to right. Perform 2 more complete rounds.



2. PELVIC TILT

HOW IT HELPS: Strengthens deep abdominal muscles called the transverse abdominis (TA) that support the spine

TRY IT: Lie on back with knees bent, feet on floor. (Take a moment to cough or laugh. Feel your belly drawing back toward your spine? That's your TA working.) As you exhale, engage TA and flatten curve of back until it presses into floor. Hold for count of 5 and release. Do 10 reps.



4. DEAD BUG

HOW IT HELPS: Prevents disk compression and lower-back pain by strengthening hip flexors and spine-supporting TA

TRY IT: Lie on back. Engage abdominals. Reach arms straight up. Bend left leg and lift it toward chest, then lower foot to floor. Repeat with right leg. Alternate legs for 20 repetitions. More challenging: Alternate lowering arms behind head, reaching back with arm opposite raised leg.



3. BIRD DOG WITH CRUNCH

HOW IT HELPS: Teaches you to engage your spine-supporting muscles while moving and balancing

TRY IT: Get on all fours with back flat. Reach left arm forward and right leg back (A), keeping pelvis even and core engaged. Then draw left elbow and right knee together until they touch (B). Do 10 repetitions, then repeat with opposite arm and leg.



5. SUPERMAN

HOW IT HELPS: Improves spinal alignment for ideal posture by shoring up muscles surrounding spine

TRY IT: Lie on belly with arms stretched forward, as if flying like Superman. Squeeze buttocks, tuck tailbone, and engage abdominal muscles to protect lower back. Slowly lift upper body and legs off floor. Hold for 5 breaths. A pinch in your lower back means you've lifted too high.

LOWER-BODY MOVES

To feel healthy and fluid in your lower body, focus on building strength and mobility in your hips. But don't forget to keep your feet happy. "You can revive the entire body through the plethora of nerves, fascia, and reflexology points on the soles of the feet," says Tiffany Cruikshank, founder of Yoga Medicine. The following sequence includes moves that open your hips and improve foot flexibility to help you walk with greater ease and more energy.

Stretching and strengthening exercises that improve knee-pelvis alignment may reduce lower-body discomfort and stave off lower-back and knee pain.

1. RECLINED IT BAND STRETCH

HOW IT HELPS: Stretches iliotibial (IT) band, which runs from the buttocks to the outer knee, to relieve pain in both areas
TRY IT: Lie on back and bend left knee. Place yoga strap around arch of left foot and straighten leg. Holding strap's ends in right hand, move left leg about 30 degrees to right or until you feel a stretch. Hold 30 seconds, then repeat with right leg.



2. ARCH RELEASE

HOW IT HELPS: Massages bottom of foot to stretch plantar fascia, the main ligament that runs along the arch of the foot. Tightness there is common and can lead to heel pain.

TRY IT: Place tennis ball or massage ball under arch of foot while sitting or standing. Lean into ball and roll it up and down arch from heel to ball of foot. Roll 30 seconds to 1 minute, then repeat with other foot.



4. CLAMSHELL

HOW IT HELPS: Strengthens gluteus medius, the muscle on the outer edge of your buttocks responsible for stabilizing your pelvis. Weak glutes can lead to painful pressure on the knees.

TRY IT: Lie on left side with knees bent 45 degrees and heels in line with spine. Keep feet touching as you lift right knee, spreading legs like an open clamshell. Keep hips facing forward. Do 10 to 20 times, then repeat on opposite side.

FITNESS



3. KNEELING HIP FLEXOR STRETCH

HOW IT HELPS: Relieves tight hip flexors, which are often stiff from sitting

TRY IT: Place towel under back knee for cushioning if needed. Come into lunge with left leg forward, placing hand on front of thigh for support. With spine upright, tuck tailbone and lean slightly into left leg until you feel a stretch along front of right hip. Hold for 5 breaths, then repeat with right leg forward.



5. CAT-COW

HOW IT HELPS: Gently warms the whole spine and restores circulation to tight back muscles; helps hydrate spinal disks

TRY IT: Get on all fours with hands directly underneath shoulders. Inhale, lifting tailbone and arching spine so that belly lowers, and look forward. Exhale, tucking tailbone and rounding spine; look downward. Repeat 5 rounds slowly, moving with your breath.