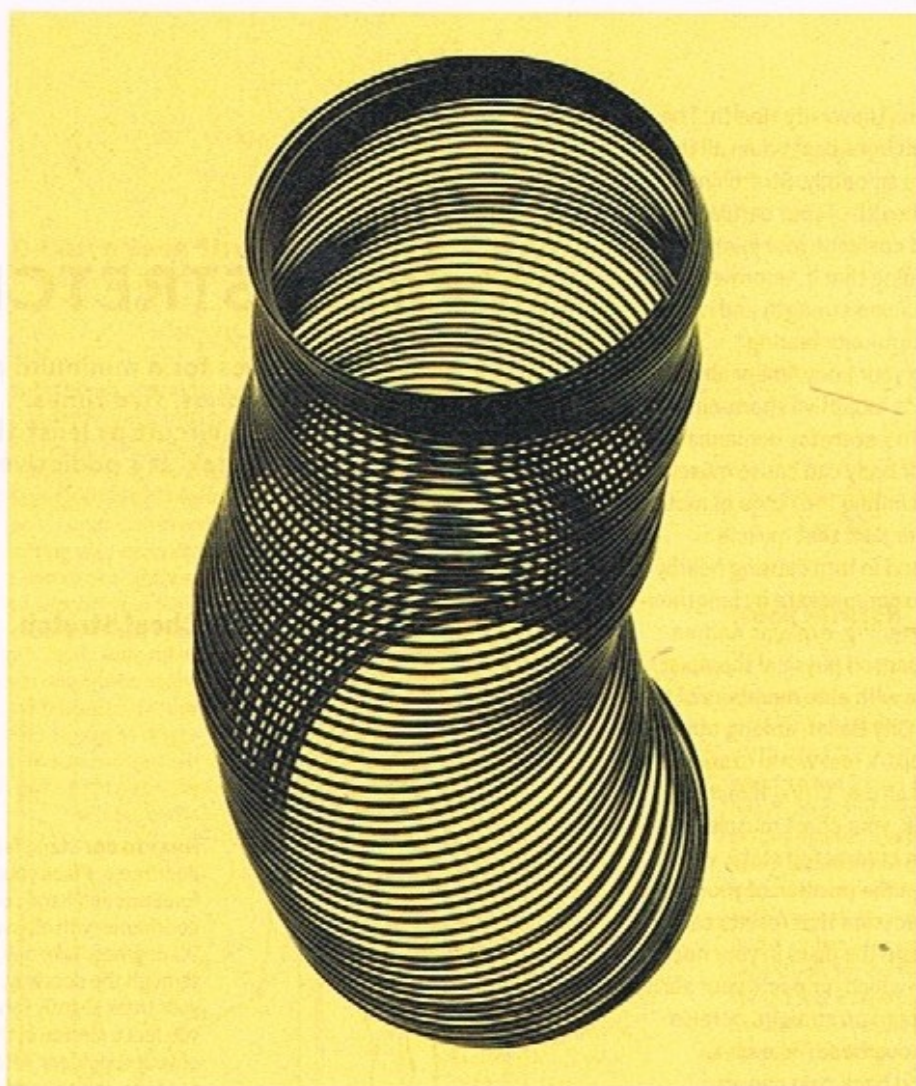


STRETCH YOURSELF HAPPY

These simple moves will help you breathe deep, stand tall, and loosen up all over. You haven't felt this good since you were doing cartwheels in the backyard.

Written by
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EVER NOTICE HOW at least one person dashes out of your fitness class before the cooldown session at the end? (Please don't tell us you're that person.) Those last-minute moves might seem optional, but they feel *really* good. And skipping them could be robbing your body of stretches that can keep it feeling good and looking younger longer. Flexibility training is one of the most ignored elements of most people's exercise programs, but it's one of the best ways to counteract the stiff joints that affect all of us over time, according to the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons.

Researchers in Brazil set out to study how our flexibility changes as we age. When you're most

bendy: age 7, according to their 2013 study, which appeared in the journal of the American Aging Association. After they hit second grade or so, women lose flexibility by an average of 0.6 percent a year—with the sharpest decline coming after age 40. The great news is that you can do something about it. In fact, just 50 to 60 percent of flexibility loss was attributed to age. The rest was due to how you live your life.

Think of your body's joints as a sort of pulley system, suggests Lucian Warth, MD, an orthopedic surgeon

with Indiana University Health. The system functions best when all the parts move smoothly. Stretching helps the health of your cartilage, the tissue that cushions your joints, says Warth, adding that it "improves blood flow, enhancing strength and resistance to rupture or tearing."

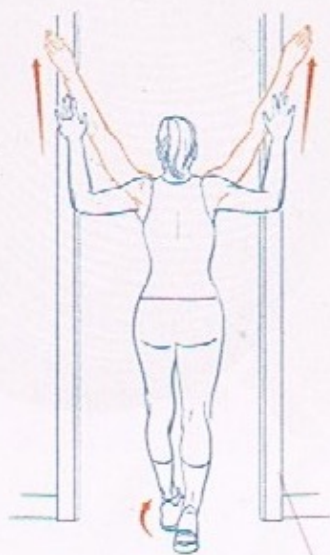
Keeping your body limber also counteracts "adaptive shortening" of muscles. The everyday demands you put on your body can cause muscles to shrink, limiting the range of motion of whatever joint that muscle crosses—and in turn causing nearby muscles to compensate by lengthening or shortening, explains Andrea Zujko, a licensed physical therapist who works with elite members of the New York City Ballet, among other clients. Zujko's real-world example: "If you spend all day sitting hunched over a desk, your chest muscles can end up in a contracted state, which will change the position of your neck." The poor posture that results can prematurely age the disks in your neck and back—which "impacts your ability to walk, stand up straight, or raise your arms overhead," she says.

Neck and back pain can also restrict your breathing—and those breathing difficulties can lead to muscle pain, according to a 2011 study in the journal *Manual Therapy*. Stretch regularly, says Zujko, and you'll literally breathe easier. "Maintaining your full range of motion allows the lungs and rib cage to fully expand and helps ensure that your diaphragm functions properly," she says. Those deep, satisfying breaths send oxygen all over, nourishing skin and other cells and preventing signs of aging.

So, yes, you'll never turn back time to when you were hanging from the monkey bars at age 7. But regular stretching can keep you feeling young and limber. Zujko suggests the following moves to get you there.

YES, STRETCH!

Hold moves for a minimum of 30 seconds, five times. Do the entire circuit at least three times a week. It's addictive.



Chest Stretch

Helps your chest stay open, which allows you to expand your rib cage and breathe more easily. To fully stretch the pectoralis major muscle, you will need to use two different arm positions.

WHAT TO DO: Stand facing a doorframe. Place your forearms and hands on the doorframe with elbows bent at 90 degrees. Take one step through the doorway, leaning your trunk slightly forward until you feel a stretch in the front of your shoulders. After 30 seconds, release and step back through the doorway. Bring arms into a high V, straight up at a diagonal from shoulders, and repeat the stretch.

Thigh-High Stretch

Releases the quadriceps muscles, keeping thighs loose and hips extended for walking, taking the stairs, and standing.

WHAT TO DO: Stand near a chair, counter, or doorframe you can hold on to for support with your right hand. Bend left leg back and up, grabbing your ankle with your left hand. Pull in your abdomen and tuck your tailbone. Keeping knee pointed toward the floor, gently pull your left heel up toward your butt without arching your back. After 30 seconds, switch sides.



THE BEST TIME TO STRETCH

Who doesn't love a good stretch? Your cold muscles. Stretch when your muscles are warm, advises Zujko, since heat enhances the elastic properties of soft tissue, making stretching efforts more productive. "You risk less of a chance of injury to the muscle tissue if you increase the blood flow to your muscles before you stretch, whether morning, noon, or night," she says. A warm-up should raise your core body temperature at least a little bit. "Do some dynamic, repetitive movement: Go for a walk and swing your arms, do shoulder circles and chest hugs, march in place, or do your regular favorite workout," says Zujko. "Then get stretching."



Shoulder Super Stretch

Helps keep shoulder blades aligned so you stand straight and tall.

WHAT TO DO: Stand or sit with your back straight, shoulders aligned over hips. Tip your right ear toward your right shoulder. Turn your head to the right and tuck your chin. Place your right hand behind the back of your head and gently push down, driving your nose toward your right armpit. After 30 seconds, switch sides.

Illustrations by
Remie Geoffroi

C-Curve Back Stretch

Lengthens the side muscles of your back that help keep your shoulders from being pulled down and forward.

WHAT TO DO: Stand facing a doorframe with arms at your sides. Reach up and grasp each side of the frame, arms at shoulder height. Bend your knees slightly, tuck your pelvis under, and round your back, letting your head drop forward. Lean back slightly, using your hands to support your weight as your shoulders rise toward your ears.



FIND YOUR CENTER

Your ideal posture is one that perfectly aligns your body against the forces of gravity. To find it, imagine a line coming from the ceiling that passes through the crown of your head, down through the vertebrae in your neck and back, slightly behind your hip joint, and slightly in front of your knee joint, ending a bit in front of your ankle joint. "Anything less than this is analogous to a poorly stacked pile of building blocks," says Zujko. "You can build off-center for only so long before the tower falls."



Neck Stretch

Corrects the dreaded "tech neck," the forward head posture you get as a result of sitting at your computer or staring at your phone all day.

WHAT TO DO: Stand with your back, head, and shoulder blades against a wall, heels about a foot away. Keeping the back of your skull in contact with the wall at all times, nod your head up and down repeatedly for 30 seconds. You should feel a stretch in the back of your neck as you work through this range of motion.