

# Stretch Away Your Pain

It takes **only minutes** a day...

**T**hose everyday aches and pains that we all experience are commonly chalked up to arthritis. But that condition is to blame far less often than most people realize.

While your doctor may order an MRI, discover arthritis or a bulging disk, and blame your musculoskeletal pain on that, **studies <?>** reveal that arthritis and other degenerative conditions often can be detected on the films of *pain-free* middle-aged and older people. Age-related musculoskeletal aches and pains that result from tension and misalignment are far more common than arthritis but *don't* show up on film. As a result, many patients resort to medicine or even surgery for arthritis or herniated disks when that's not the real source of their pain.

Instead, it's poor posture combined with the inactivity of everyday living and underused joints that lead to stiffness and pain, whether it's shoulder pain, hip pain, back pain, etc.

**GOOD NEWS:** Doing strategic stretching, strengthening and range of motion exercises for *just 10 minutes a day is enough* to keep your muscles supple, your joints lubricated and everyday aches and pain at bay. Incorporate each of these moves into your daily routine to prevent various types of pain and to help relieve it. *Note:* Hold each stretch for 30 seconds if you're younger than age 65...and for 60 seconds if you're 65 or older.

**Studies <?>** show that most of the benefit comes from the first stretch, so *one repetition is sufficient*. However, you can repeat these stretches throughout the day whenever your back, neck and/or shoulders feel tight or stiff...

• **Shoulder and chest stretch.**

This is one of the most important—and simplest—moves you can do to reverse the rounded-shoulder posture that affects so many people.

**WHAT TO DO:** Lie on the floor (on an exercise mat for comfort), face up, arms straight out to the sides in a "T" position with palms up. That's it! Believe it or not, this very simple stretch helps loosen the tight, shortened muscles in the front of your neck, shoulders and chest.

• **Neck stretch.** This stretch reverses the tension caused when one's head juts forward—common when driving or typing. It also elongates and aligns the neck, creating space for disks between the vertebrae, which lessens the odds of a bulging or herniated disk.

**WHAT TO DO:** Begin by **lying flat on your back on a bed or a mat on the floor.** Allow your head to relax for a few seconds. Then reach up



and place the fingers of both hands in the space beneath your neck. With fingertips touching, move them to the bottom of your head. Now move your fingers up, pushing or sliding the back of your head upwards, feeling the back of your neck elongating. *Note:* This movement may tilt your head down a bit, but the back of your head should stay in contact with the bed or floor at all times. **<At which point do you hold? Or how long is this done?>**

• **Psoas stretch.** The psoas (pronounced "SO-az") is the most important muscle you've never heard of—it's the main muscle connecting the spine to the legs, and it works with other muscles to stabilize the lower spine and promote proper body alignment. The psoas often weakens with age and inactivity, leading to lower back and hip pain

and poor posture.

**WHAT TO DO:** Start by lying flat on your belly (on an exercise mat, if you wish) with your forehead resting on the backs of your crossed hands. Allow your stomach to relax and notice the natural curve of your lower back. For many older patients, this provides enough of a stretch—if so, continue doing this daily for a week or two until you no longer feel the stretch in your lower back, which means you're ready for the next step—slowly press up onto your forearms (Sphinx) or your palms (Cobra). Remember, keeping your belly relaxed as your lower back gently stretches is more important than trying to lift higher.

• **Piriformis stretch.** The piriformis is a small muscle that runs diagonally from the bottom part of the spine to the upper thighbone on each side of the body. Asymmetry can develop after years of driving with your right foot on the gas pedal, crossing your legs the same way or sleeping in the same position, which can cause pain in the hips and lower back.

**WHAT TO DO:** Sit in a chair with both feet on the floor. Rest your right ankle on top of your left thigh, just above the knee. Keeping your back straight, gently bend forward at the waist until you feel a stretch in your right thigh and glute. Then repeat on the other side.

*Bottom Line Health* interviewed...

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