

Stretch for better running

Stretching is neglected by many of us - which is a shame as it has the potential to improve our performance, prevent injuries and keep us supple into old age. Why not add it to your running regime today?

You've mastered the art of jogging and bit-by-bit will have noticed improvements to your fitness levels, allowing you to enjoy running and get more from your training. What you might be uncertain about is stretching out after your runs and making sure that your poor old muscles are returned to their pre-exercise length before you head home for the couch.

There will be a few reasons for this and I would hazard a guess that one of them might be a self-conscious factor as you worry about what people will think of you; another that you don't really know where to start and how to do it properly; and lastly that you don't understand exactly why it is so important to include stretching as part of your workout.

runABC North and Bridge of Allan-based personal trainer Gilly Marshall have put together an introductory guide to stretching (highlighting a few simple stretches) and we hope that stretching before, but certainly after, you run will become as natural to you as taking to the road in your trainers.

Stretching should be an important part of your running regime for a variety of reasons. Not only does it help return your muscles to a pre-exercise length but it improves and maintains range of motion in your joints and helps with your flexibility. Reduced flexibility is related to aging, so keeping supple aids in long-term mobility and will keep your joints younger for longer. It is widely recognised that as part of a well-balanced fitness plan you must include the following three components: cardio, strength training and stretching in order to get the most out of your efforts.

Static stretching is best for recreational runners as the risk of injury is low, it requires little time and limited assistance and can be effective if done properly.

In this edition we will focus on the three primary static stretches for runners that take care of the upper calf, front of thigh (quadriceps) and back of thigh (hamstring). With all stretches care must be taken to move into the position in a slow, controlled manner and make sure to breathe and relax whilst doing it. Remember to hold each of the stretches for about 20 seconds and only stretch to the point of resistance - it might be uncomfortable but you should not feel any pain.

Quadricep stretch

You should feel this stretch in the large thigh muscles at the front of your leg.

If you are unsure of holding your balance then it is best to do this stretch with a park bench or gate to hand. Bend your knee and raise your heel to your bottom (or as far as it will go) hold in position by grasping your foot and pull up and back until you feel the stretch.

Remember to keep knee pointing down and not outwards.



Calf stretch

You should feel this stretch in your large calf muscles at the back of your leg.

Place your hands against a wall and keep yourself an arms length away from it, put your rear foot about 30cm behind your front foot and lean towards the wall keeping your back leg straight and your front leg bent.

Remember to keep weight on front leg and keep foot and calf aligned.

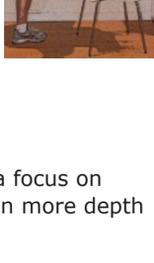


Hamstring stretch

You should feel this stretch in the large thigh muscles at the back of your leg.

Rest one leg on a park bench or step (keeping your foot lower than waist height). The raised leg should be straight but do not allow the knee to lock. Lean forward from the waist until you feel the stretch.

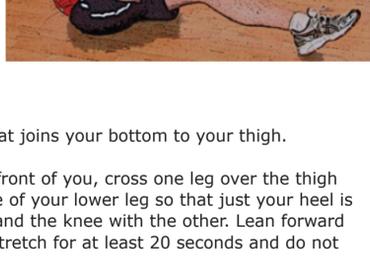
Remember to keep hips aligned and your body upright.



A stronger bottom

Earlier we told you how to Stretch for Better Running with a focus on three primary static stretches. Now we look at one stretch in more depth and how you can progress the stretch over time.

In the seated glute stretch - the target is your Gluteus Maximus or to put it in layman's terms - your bum! The glute muscles are the largest in your body and if they are tight then it can have negative effects on your running (lower back pain after a run is one example), it is therefore a good idea to stretch them out and strengthen them as part of your running regime. This stretch is one that can be easily carried out wherever you are and will help to strengthen your glute muscles and increase your flexibility.



On floor method

You should feel this stretch in the large muscle that joins your bottom to your thigh.

Sit on the floor or a mat with legs straight out in front of you, cross one leg over the thigh of the other. Lean back slightly and bend the knee of your lower leg so that just your heel is on the floor. Grasp the upper foot with one hand and the knee with the other. Lean forward by pulling your torso toward your legs. Hold the stretch for at least 20 seconds and do not bounce. Repeat with opposite leg.

Remember to keep your spine straight throughout the stretch.

As you continue with this stretch you will find it becomes easier and your muscles will not be getting the benefits they once did. By tilting your pelvis upwards and/or bringing your outstretched leg closer (heel closer/knee higher) you will intensify the stretch and give your muscles the work out they require.

Top End Stretches

Elsewhere on the site we have shown how to stretch after a run - focusing on the lower areas of the body. In this article we look at the upper part of the body as it can feel tense and achy post-run. After a run, the three core areas of your upper body - shoulders, back and chest can be tackled simultaneously in a series of simple stretches ...

Shoulder Stretch

You should feel this stretch at the top of your shoulders. Stand straight with your hips facing forward and your legs hip-width apart. Position your arm across your upper body with your palm facing your chest and place your opposite hand on your elbow. Push your elbow towards your chest until you feel a comfortable stretch and hold for 15 seconds. Repeat this with the opposite arm.



Back Stretch

You should feel this stretch in the upper region of your back. Stand straight with your hips facing forward and your legs hip-width apart. Extend your arms to the front at shoulder level with your fingers interlaced and your palms facing outwards. Stretch your arms forward until you feel some resistance and hold for 15 seconds.



Chest Stretch

You should feel this stretch in your chest and upper arms. Stand straight with your hips facing forward and your legs hip-width apart. Place your hands in the hollow of your lower back, fingers pointing downwards. Pull your elbows together and force out your chest, as you start to feel resistance hold for 15 seconds.

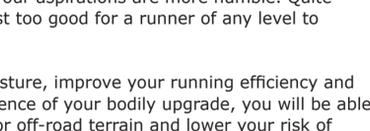


Personal trainer Patricia McCrellis says: "These simple stretches are great for loosening up after a strenuous run as they return your muscles to their pre-exercise state. However, if you are experiencing real pain and stiffness in your back and shoulders after running then it might be worthwhile investing in a foam roller." If you have a troublesome muscle knot then applying direct pressure with a foam roller is a great way of easing the pain and applying a stretch to the area. For a simple back stretch try lying on the floor with the roller placed under your mid back, with your hips raised from the floor and begin to roll up and down slowly until a 'tender point' is located - when you reach this point stop rolling and hold until the pain decreases by around 70%.

Thanks to Patricia McCrellis who offered advice on this article. For more information about her personal training services contact her on: rocksteadyfitness@hotmail.co.uk

Core Of The Matter

Building core strength is a tried and trusted way of improving as a runner. Better performance, faster times and a stronger body are the rewards for some hard work. Regular contributor Chris Broadbent takes us through some of the moves ...



As runners, it's very easy to fall into the trap of purely focusing on training our legs and cardiovascular system to improve our running. You want to be a better runner? Then get out there and practise running. Sound logic on the surface and - to a certain degree - that simple philosophy does hold true.

But if it's real improvement you want, then you have to take a much broader perspective. After all, the whole body runs - not just the legs. In recent years 'core strength' has become the buzz term of endurance running. It refers to the training of the stomach, back and pelvic areas at the core (or trunk) of the human body.

For elite runners, core strength training has become an essential element of their weekly regime. Where they lead, we must follow, even if our aspirations are more humble. Quite simply, the benefits of this type of training are just too good for a runner of any level to ignore.

Working on the core will give you an improved posture, improve your running efficiency and increase your stability and balance. As a consequence of your bodily upgrade, you will be able to run faster, run for longer, be better equipped for off-road terrain and lower your risk of injury.

Think of your body as a football team. The legs are the star strikers that grab all the glory, but without those dogged defenders and creative midfielders around the hips, back and tummy, the legs are less likely to reach their goal come the big day.

So, here comes the science bit - concentrate! The core consists of around 30 muscles. The key groups are:

- **Transversus Abdominals**
- **Rectus Abdominals**
- **Spinae Erector**
- **Obliques**
- **Hip Flexors**

The Transversus Abs are the layer of horizontal fibres stretching from the side of the body to the front. They act as an internal belt and provide stability.

Their more glamorous cousins are the Rectus Abs or six-pack, as they are more affectionately known. They form the vertical wall at the lower end of the torso. Well developed Rectus Abs will not only gain you some admiring glances on the beach, but play a key role in improving your running. Their prime role is for the flexing and curling of the core.

The Spinae Erector consists of two thick columns of muscle that run either side of the grooves beside the spine. They enable movement of the spine and neck, providing support for one of the most critical parts of the skeleton.

The Obliques have the task of helping the mid-section twist and rotate, something the body does with every running stride.

Finally, the Hip Flexors connect the lower back to the pelvis and upper thigh. Their role is to stabilise and pull the thigh and knee up for each stride.

So, now the introductions are over, let's really build a relationship with our new muscular running buddies and see how we can work together to get to that finish line quicker. Here are some useful exercises to set you off.

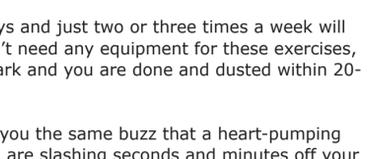
The Plank

Looks easy, but really requires a solid bit of effort for the benefits to come. This simple exercise can strengthen just about the whole body. Lie down on your front nice and flat. Push up on your forearms and toes, keep your forearms on the ground and your elbows directly below your shoulders. Clasp your hands in the middle as if praying, form a perfect straight line from your head through your back, right down your legs and hold. Don't allow your hips to sag. Hold for 30-90 seconds. It's good to have your iPod on and directly below your eyeline, that way you can listen to a tune and keep an eye of the seconds counting down. Take a 30 second break and repeat for up to three reps.



Side Plank

A similar exercise to the Plank, but on your side. Again, push up using your right forearm, with your left arm on your side. Get the head, back and legs perfectly in line and hold. Again 30-90 seconds is sufficient. Depending on how comfortable you are. The last 10 seconds should be a struggle, but no more. If you are struggling for much longer, you are over-doing it. If you are not struggling, you are under-doing it. Take a 30 second break and repeat for up to three reps. Switch sides using the left arm to push up and repeat.



Bicycle

Lie on your back with your hands behind your ears and your legs stretched out on the floor in front of you. Lift your shoulder blades. Try not to tuck your chin into your chest, you might strain your neck. Try to imagine you are trying to grip an apple in between your chin and chest. Bend your right knee up towards your chest and touch that knee with your left elbow. Repeat with left knee and right elbow. Continue with exercise as it resembles a cycling movement. Pick a number of repetitions which means the last two or three are a struggle. No more, no less.



Basic Crunch

Lie on your back with your hands behind your head and knees bent at a 90-degree angle, legs lifted off the floor. Again, keep that imaginary apple wedged between your chin and chest. Lift your head and shoulders up off the floor as you crunch your legs in towards your nose, lifting your bum off the ground as well. As above, choose a number which make the last two or three difficult.

A good time to perform these exercises is rest days and just two or three times a week will make a big difference. The beauty is that you don't need any equipment for these exercises, they can be performed easily at home or in the park and you are done and dusted within 20-30 minutes.

In all likelihood, the above exercises will not give you the same buzz that a heart-pumping run will. The buzz comes down the line, when you are slashing seconds and minutes off your best times. Most importantly of all, they will help you get to more start lines and more finish lines in one piece.

More great advice here

