



Supplementary Stretches for Pilates Mat Work

Introduction

The Pilates mat work alone is a flowing workout session. The stretches are thus dynamic, which is a very necessary (and usually neglected) component of any total body conditioning program. I have found however, that slower and/or static stretches (static = “none moving”) are necessary to make the Pilates matwork and its effects come alive. The benefits of extra stretching are remarkable, and numerous: Tight hip flexors and abdominals that are part and parcel of the “off the shelf” classic Pilates workout become super-functional. Buttock muscles become pain free. Calf muscles (the suspension system of the foot and leg) become firmer and more responsive to running and sprinting drills. Likewise the problematic muscles that anchor the shoulder blade and form the “rotator cuff” regain their competence, and pain free movement.

But that is enough talking. Reading my words will do nothing for you. Do the workout! Do the stretches! Enjoy returning to the happy and comfortable movement that you had as a child!

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Kneeling Stretches



QUAD STRETCH

(Kneel on a towel cushion, or Pilates mat).

Start Position

1. Kneel with thigh bones vertical, and bring one heel up to the center of the butt cheek.
2. Use one or two hands to hold it in place.

Action

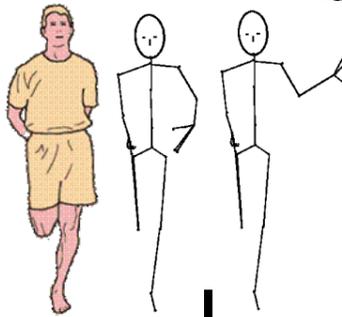
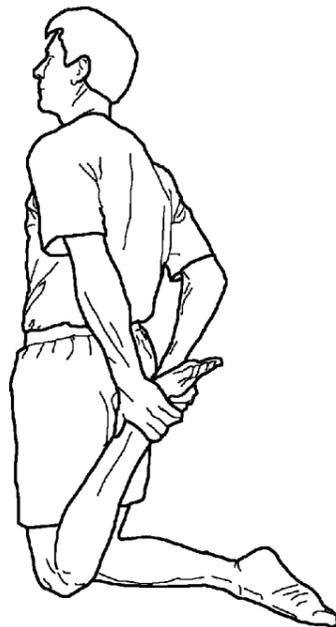
1. Zip!
2. Gently pull on the ankle.

Watch Points

1. The pelvis is a bucket. Tip water out of the back of the bucket!
2. Long spine!

Standing Version:

1. Lift the bent knee up and into the standing knee.
2. Using the leg muscles, pulse the heel into the center of the butt cheek.
3. 10 to 40 pulses each side.



Alternatives

Alternatives

See pictures.

If even these are too difficult, lie face down with a pillow under the stomach. Hold the tummy in and breathe into the side of the ribs and upper back while a friend gently pushes the heel to the center of the butt cheek. It is also possible to do this while lying on the side.

What this exercise does

Stretches the quadriceps muscles, especially the Rectus femoris.

Benefits

4. When the rectus femoris can lengthen smoothly, the hamstrings do not have to work so hard (means smooth and efficient running).
5. A smoothly lengthening rectus femoris does not pull the front of the pelvis down, which is a common cause of back pain in the elderly and/or those with "large tummies".
6. Intense hip flexor workouts (such as Pilates matwork) tighten the rectus femoris and cause trigger points. This stretch antidotes that.
- 7.
- 8.

SIR GALAHAD

Start Position

1. Kneel with right leg backward and left leg forward.
2. Tuck the back-foot toes below the heel.
3. Place one hand on the knee and the other hand parallel with it.

Action 1

1. Gently zip!
2. The pelvis is a bucket. Tip water out of the back of the bucket!
3. Bring a vertical torso forward!

Action 2

(Lift the arm the side of the back leg and "push the moon high").

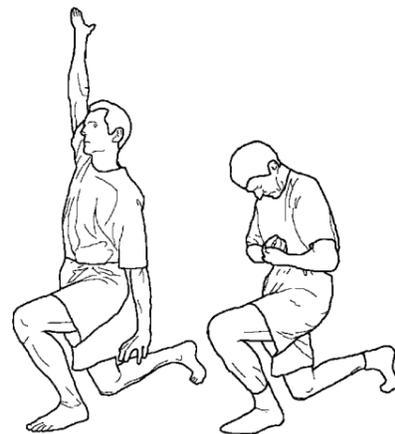
1. Gently zip!
2. Tip water out of the back of the bucket!

Bring a vertical torso forward!

Action 3

(Place both hands against the bottom of the breastbone, and gently push it backward and upward, then tuck your chin and round forward over your hands).

1. Gently zip!
2. Tip water out of the back of the bucket!
3. Bring a vertical torso forward!



Watch Points

1. The torso remains vertical at all times, even for action 3.

Alternatives

1. Sore knee: place a cushion under the knee.
2. Poor balance: use the wall or a chair for support.

What this exercise does

Stretches the hip flexors: Rectus femoris, Iliacus, and the entire length of the Psoas

Benefits

Absolutely necessary antidote to the shortening and trigger point effects of chair sitting, running, and the intense hip flexor workout that is part of the Pilates matwork. Keeps hip arthritis at bay! No other hip flexor stretch does it better!



STARTING BLOCKS DOWN AND UP

Start Position

1. Knee with one leg forward and one leg back
2. Place the hands either side of the front foot, and lengthen the back leg to the wall behind.
3. Drape the front arm pit over the front of the thigh.

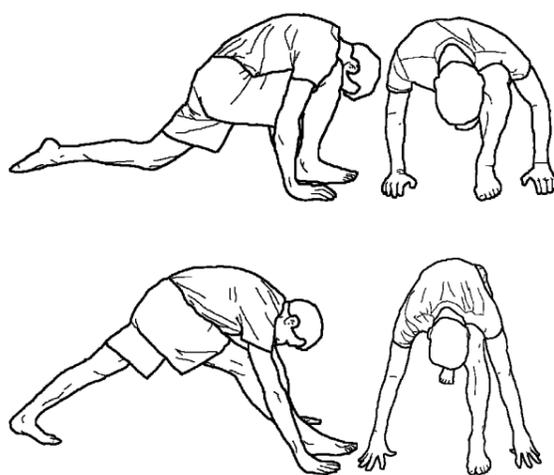
Action 1

1. Lengthen the spine, and ease the body forward until you feel a stretch on the inside thigh of the forward leg.

Action 2

1. Zip!
2. Straighten both legs, and let the pelvis come high.
3. Relax the back ankle and sink the heel toward the mat.

One to 5 breathes each side.



Benefits

It's quite possible to work around tight hamstrings, and still be effective when running and for other day to day movement patterns – you just learn to bend your knees more, or work with a rounded back. The torn hamstring and lower back problems come when you attempt to save yourself when the foot slips, or stretch out for sprinting, or at the end of a marathon when the hamstrings are cramping up. Effective stretching will help you monitor the status of your hamstrings, and also protect them from damage

Alternatives

Action 2: If the stretch on the front leg is severe, just straighten the knee to the comfortable limit.

What this exercise does

Stretches and maintains the hamstrings

Action 1: The adductor magnus

Action 2: The Other hamstrings.

Picture: An elite Kenyan runner with a very tight Adductor magnus. Look for the tight line from the inside left knee to the inside trouser line.



DOWN DOG

Start Position

The crawler position with knees directly under hips and hands directly over shoulders.

Tuck your toes under your heels.

Action

Zip!

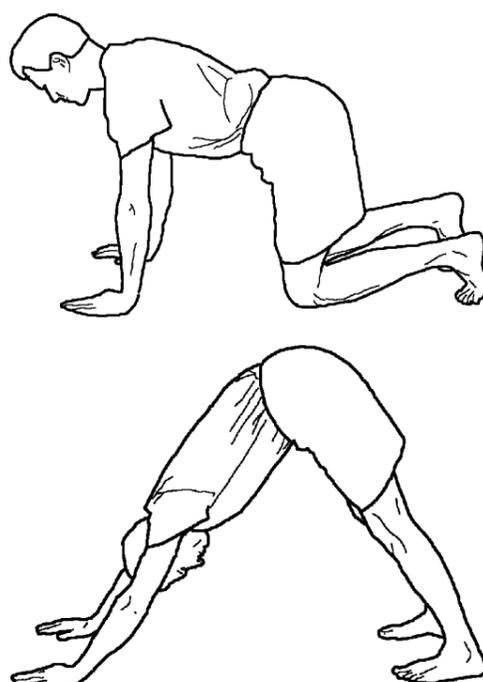
Straighten your knees, and push your hips high.

Keep the back of the neck long, and attempt to bring the head between the arms.

Relax your heels down to the mat.

Watch Points

Work towards forming a perfect pyramid shape.



Alternatives

Just work within your limits.

What this exercise does

1. Stretches the hamstrings.
2. Stretches the Gastrocnemius.
3. Stretches the connective tissues from the sole of the foot all the way up to the lower back.
4. Stretches the Teres major (runs from the side of the shoulder blade to the upper arm bone).
5. Wakes up the lazy Serratus anterior muscle.

Benefits

Try this stretch after a prolonged bout of sitting at your computer workstation:

1. Pumps the blood out of the calf muscles!
2. Wakes up the slumped shoulder girdle!
3. Pretty soon, you will have the whole office doing it.



REST POSITIONS ARMS FORWARD AND BACK

Start Position

Start from the crawler position.

Action 1

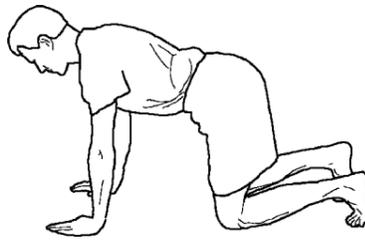
1. Gently zip.
2. Sit back onto your heels.
3. Just relax in that position.
4. Breathe into the sides of the ribs and upper back.

Action 2

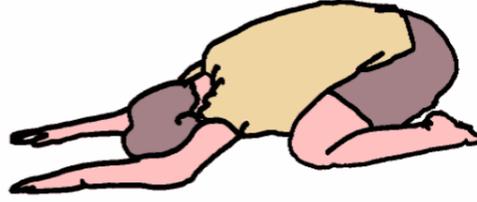
1. Bring lazy arms to your sides, and reach past the feet with your hands.
2. Now relax totally. Let go of all tension, (Including the shoulders and Pilates belly zip).

Alternatives

You may like to walk your hands forward on outstretched fingers so as to stretch the muscles around the armpit.



Arms forward



Arms backward



Watch Points

Move into the position mindfully, and only take the sitting on the heels to the point where there is no pain in the ankles, knees, or hips.

What this exercise does:-

1. A counter stretch to follow up after intense back extensor activity.
2. Initiates calming and relaxing.
3. Loosens up the deep muscles behind the hip joint and thus makes space for the head of the femur to stay back in its socket (a major cause of hip arthritis is when the head of the femur is pushed forward in its socket).

Benefits

Helps prevent hip arthritis. Because for most people, it feels safe, it can be very relaxing and calming.

HEEL SIT BIG TOE STRETCH

Important! –

This (and all other Pilates exercises) must be done bare foot.

Start Position

The crawler position with toes tucked under the heels.

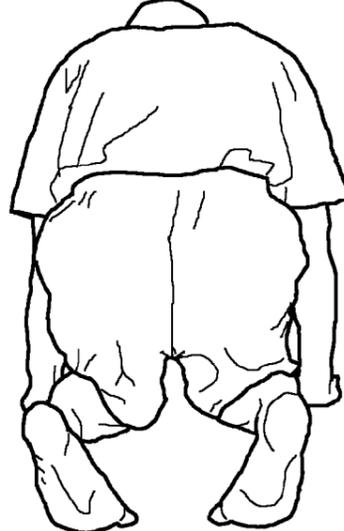
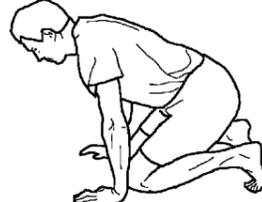
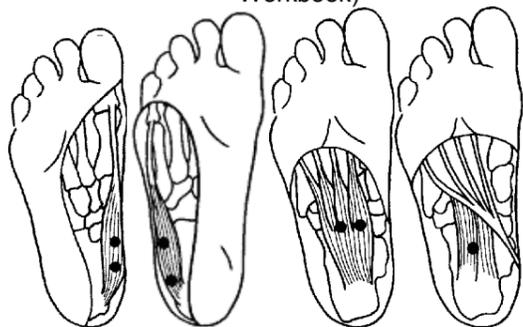
Action

1. Spread the toes.
2. Sit back on the heels.
3. Angle the feet to spread the stretch equally to all toes.

Watch Points

In order to spread the stretch over all the toes, the heels should angle out to the side.

Below: The muscles in the sole of the foot.
(Source: Clair Davies: The Trigger Point Therapy Workbook)



Alternatives

If this proves to be painful on the balls of the toes or on the soles of the feet, you should consult a massage therapist about trigger points in the foot and calf muscles.

What this exercise does

Stretches the toes flexor muscles in the calf:

1. Flexor Digitorum longus
2. Flexor Hallucis longus

Stretches the Toe flexor muscles in the sole of the foot:

1. Abductor Digiti Minimi
2. Abductor Hallucis
3. Flexor Digitorum brevis
4. Quadratus plantae

Benefits

(Runners): The toe flexor muscles supplement the action of the calf muscles. If you want to be light on your feet and achieve a competitive advantage, look after them!

(All people): Plantar "fasciitis" is caused by dysfunctional foot muscles. (Why didn't my physio tell me that)? Stretching will help those muscles.



Seated Stretches

KNEE TO NIPPLE STRETCH

Start Position

1. Sit very tall toward the front of a standard dining room chair or stool.
2. Place the right ankle over the left knee.
3. Interlace the fingers over the bent knee.

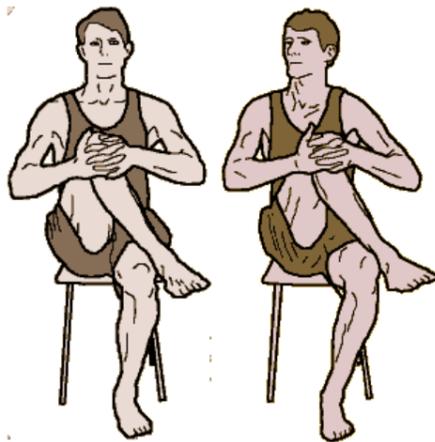
Action

1. Zip!
2. Elongate the spine.
3. Bring the knee to the opposite nipple, and the ankle out to the side

Watch Points

Look straight ahead. The spine remains untwisted and elongating (see "What this exercise does").

(Look straight ahead, not to the side!)



Benefits

Prevents "Pain in the Butt"!

Prolonged office chair sitting, especially when combined with a vigorous athletic lifestyle, will inevitably lead to the development of trigger points and pain in the buttock muscles and the leg. This stretch minimizes the risk of such pain and dysfunction.

Alternatives

1. Knee pain: if it is possible to perform this stretch starting from the crawler position. The same comments about spinal alignment apply.
2. If knee pain or hip pain makes this stretch difficult to impossible as a treatment for a "pain in the butt", seek the help of a massage therapist.

What this exercise does

This is a stretch for the huge muscles of the buttock (Gluteus maximus, Gluteus medius, Piriformis, deep external hip rotators). Due to the size and stiffness of these muscles, any buttock muscle stretch risks stretching the ligaments of the sacrum and lower back more than the actual muscles. It is therefore crucial:-

1. That you maintain your spine long (no twisting or flexing forward).
2. That you maintain a gentle zipping action in your lower abdomen.

LEAN ON KNEE

Start Position

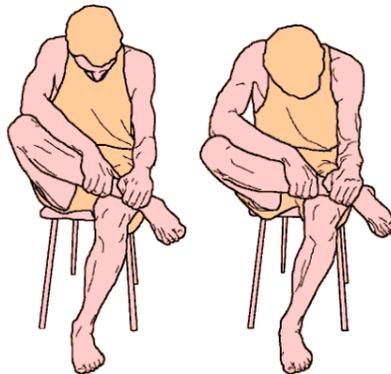
1. Sit toward the front of a standard dining room chair or stool.
2. Place the right ankle over the left knee.
3. Place both hands over the lower shin bone and ankle, and the right elbow over the right knee.

Action

Gently zip!
Lean the elbow into the knee.

Watch Points

Since this stretch might be intensely uncomfortable, take your time to breathe into it and relax. See "alternatives".



Below: The Gluteus minimus



Alternatives

Perform the "crossed calves" stretch, but seated with your back against the wall. In this position, you can use the hand rather than the elbow to "lean on the knee". a massage therapist can provide much relief through trigger point massage.

What this exercise does

Stretches the Gluteus minimus muscle. This muscle acts as a side strut to the thigh bone. Trigger points in the Gluteus minimus muscle can be a hidden source of pain and numbness down the side of the leg. They may occur at the same time as, or totally independent of any pressure on the sciatic nerve.

Benefits

Runners:

1. More stable pelvis.
2. Less low back pain
3. Greater rotational stability in the whole leg and ankle.
4. Stretching it will tell you if there is a problem!

Elderly:

The same apply (see comments under "alternatives").



Leg Stretches that use the Wall

CROSSED CALVES

Start Position

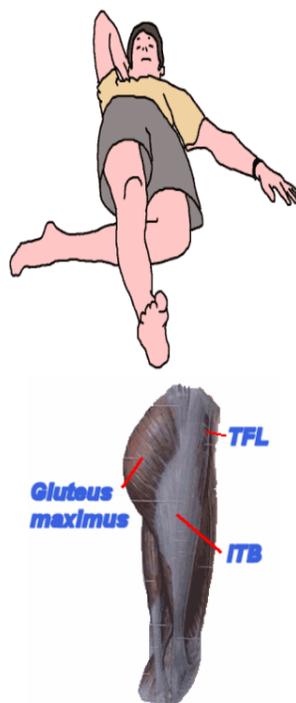
1. Lie on your back and place the left leg under the right.
2. Bend the knee at right angles.
3. The left arm goes out to the side

Action

1. Zip!
2. Relax the highest hip down toward the floor.
3. Half to 5 minutes both sides.

Watch Points

1. Keep both knees within a handbreadth of each other.
2. If the top leg slides away to the side, place yourself such that a wall or other solid object holds it in place.



Alternatives

If you prop your head on a pillow, you can watch TV!

What this exercise does

Stretches the Tensor fascia lata and the front (anterior) part of the Iliotibial band.

Benefits

The tensor fascia lata is worked hard during walking, running and cycling, especially when there is hill work or back packing involved. Follow all that hard work up with long bouts of desk sitting, and you will get the tensor fascia lata problems: "Stiff hips", "hip bursitis", "Iliotibial band syndrome", "hip arthritis". Often poorly diagnosed! Often poorly treated! Don't go there - use this easy stretch instead.

(2) Helps reverse knock kneed gait.

V-LEGS

Start Position

Lie on your back with your legs reaching up the wall.

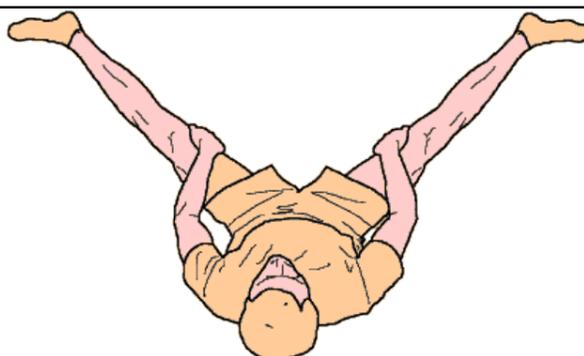
Action

Simply let the legs spread out into a wide "V".

Take your time. Use full quiet breathing to encourage relaxation.

Watch Points

The inside leg muscles (the adductor muscles of the hip) do not easily relax and lengthen, so take your time. One to 3 minutes of quiet meditation



Alternatives

1. Sit upright with your back close against the wall, and long legs on the floor in front.
2. Use your hands to help spread the legs into the widest V that you can manage, and sit quietly.

What this exercise does

Stretches the back hip adductor muscles (Adductor magnus, Medial hamstrings)

Benefits

1. Good for office chair sitters!
2. Frees up the leg movement.
3. Encourages the head of the femur to slide back to its proper central location in the hip socket.
4. Lets you get to know and treat any Trigger points in the muscles, which can be a hidden source of lower abdominal discomfort.



SITTING TAYLOR

Start Position

1. Sit with your back close in against the wall.

Action

1. Place your feet together close to your hips and spread your knees wide.

Watch Points

1. The inside leg muscles (the adductor muscles of the hip) do not easily relax and lengthen, so take your time. One to 3 minutes of foot massage or magazine reading is a good idea.

Picture: Sitting Tailor. Take the opportunity to massage the soles of your feet while you stretch!



Alternatives

If the stretch is a little severe, place pillows or cushions under the sides of the knees.

What this exercise does

- Stretches the middle adductor muscles: The Pectineus and the Gracillus.

Benefits

- Good for office chair sitters!
- Encourages the head of the femur to slide back to its proper central location in the hip socket.

LYING TAYLOR WITH GOAL POST ARMS

Start Position

1. Lie on your back with your bent knees together and the toes against a wall or piece of furniture

Action

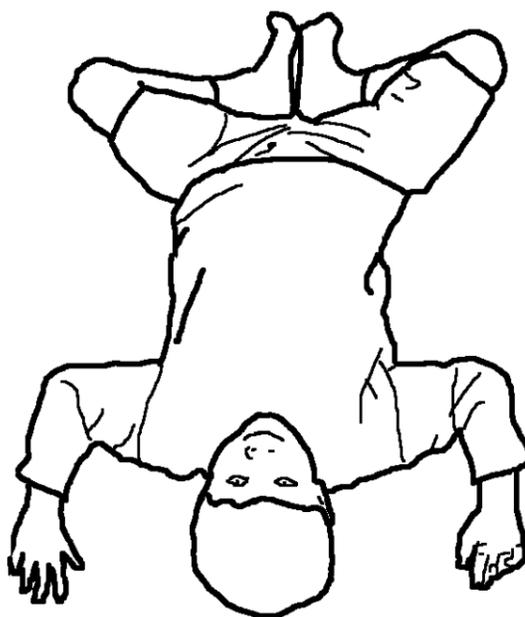
1. Zip!
2. Let the knees widen.
3. Breathe into the side of the ribs and upper back, and keep your spine long and pressed into the mat (this will help the goal post component of the stretch).
4. Place your arms out to the side like rugby goal posts. and encourage the backs of the hands to lower to the floor.

Watch Points

1. The inside leg muscles (the adductor muscles of the hip) do not easily relax and lengthen, so take your time.

Picture:

An easy stretch if you are a child – not so easy in later life!



Alternatives

- If the stretch is a little severe, place pillows or cushions under the sides of the knees.
- If there is pain around the sacrum, consider wearing a pelvic support belt while stretching, or waiting until your zip and hollow muscle (Transversus abdominis) is stronger.

What this exercise does

- Stretches the front hip adductors: The adductors longus and brevis.
- The goalpost part stretches the Subscapularis muscle.

Benefits

- Good for office chair sitters!
- A necessary stretch for horse riders, runners and cross country skiers!
- Regular stretching work on the Subscapular muscle will minimize the chances of "Frozen Shoulder).



TWO UP ONE DOWN

Start Position

1. Stand at arms length to the wall, and place hands at shoulder height on the wall.
2. Stand on a one inch board if you have one.
3. Rise up on the balls of both toes with the knees locked.

Action: "Down on One"

(Exhale on the way down).

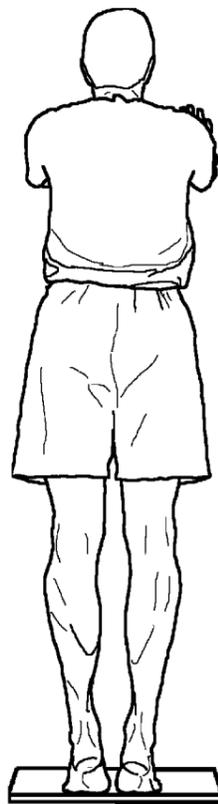
1. Zip and maintain a long spine.
2. Lift the left foot off the ground & lower the right heel slowly.

Action: "Up on Two"

(Inhale on the way up).

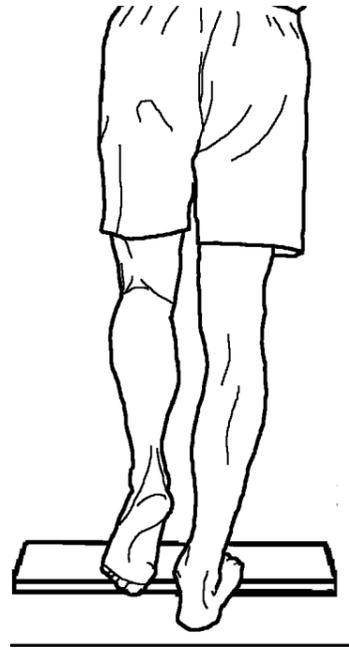
1. Place the left foot beside the right foot & push up on two.

(Five times each side).



Watch Point

Work with a measured pace.
Take time to feel the stretch.



Alternatives

- Increase the load by putting a pack on your back.
- If there is pain, and you need to load the calf muscles less, stand between two chair backs for support, and with the balls of your toes on one inch high block of wood.

What this exercise does

1. Works the second biggest calf muscle (the Gastrocnemius) muscle by "eccentric contraction".

Eccentric contraction is when you load a muscle that it is shortened, and then let it lengthen under that load. Working the calf muscle in this way is a proven method of fixing an Achilles tendonitis. It may also be a good method of treating trigger points in overworked calf muscles.

Benefits

2. Fixes Achilles tendonitis "better than surgery".*

*(Quote from a local orthopaedic surgeon).

TWO UP ONE DOWN WITH BENT KNEES

Start Position

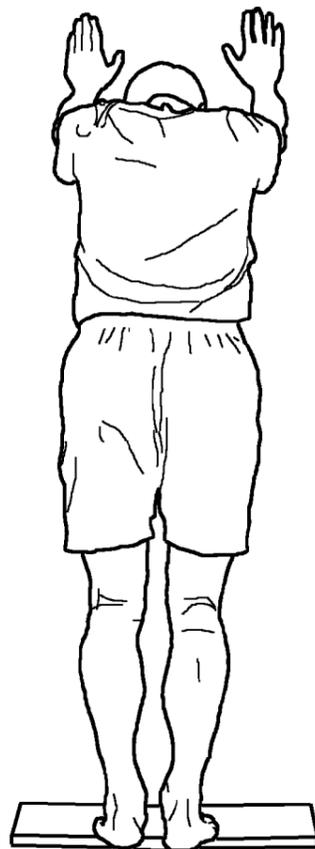
1. Stand at arms length to the wall, and place hands at shoulder height on the wall.
2. Stand on a one inch board if you have one.
3. Rise up on the balls of toes with the knees bent.

Action: "Down on One"

1. (Exhale on the way down).
2. Zip and maintain a long spine.
3. Lift the left foot off the ground & lower the right heel slowly.

Action: "Up on Two"

1. (Inhale on the way up).
2. Place the left foot beside the right foot & push up on two.
3. (Five times each side).



Watch Point

Work with a measured pace.
Take time to feel the stretch.



Alternatives

- Increase the load by putting a pack on your back.
- If there is pain, and you need to load the calf muscles less, stand between two chair backs for support, and with the balls of your toes on one inch high block of wood.

What this exercise does

- Works the biggest calf muscle the (Soleus muscle) by "eccentric contraction".

Eccentric contraction is when you load a muscle that it is shortened, and then let it lengthen under that load. Working the calf muscle in this way is a proven method of fixing an Achilles tendonitis. It may also be a good method of treating trigger points in overworked calf muscles.

Benefits

- Fixes Achilles tendonitis "better than surgery".*

*(Quote from a local orthopaedic surgeon).



Arm Stretches that use the Wall

SPIDER MAN

This stretch must be performed bare foot.

Start Position

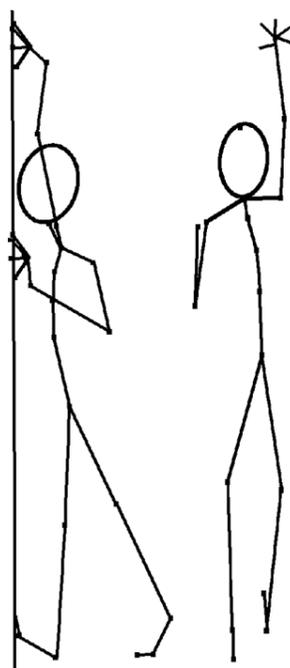
1. Face the wall with your right toes placed against the wall.
2. Reach high up the wall with your right hand, and place your left hand in front of the left shoulder.

Action

1. Zip!
2. Breathe into the side of the ribs and the upper back!
3. Tuck your chin and lengthen your spine!
4. Bring your chest and right arm pit to the wall.
5. Walk the fingers of the right arm up the wall to maximize the stretch.

Watch Points

Make sure that your armpit faces toward the wall. This keeps the collar bone forward and stops risk of it pressing delicate tissues of the neck



Alternatives

The arms over head position in many Pilates exercises.

What this exercise does

Stretches the muscles around the arm pit:

1. The Teres muscles that run from the outer edge of the shoulder blade to the upper arm bone.
2. The Coracobrachialis.
3. The Subscapularis
4. The lower part of the Pectoralis major.

Stretches the muscles of the calf and sole of the foot.

Benefits

1. Free up the shoulder for reaching overhead.
2. Encourages the lazy postural muscles of the shoulder to engage and strengthen.

TRICEPS TOWEL STRETCH

Start Position

1. Stand facing the wall.
2. Grasp a towel behind your back with one hand reaching from above and the other hand reaching from below.

Action for Downward Pull

1. Brace the torso by zipping the lower abdomen and breathing into the side of the ribs and upper back.
2. Lean the upper most elbow into the wall at the same time as pulling downward with the lowermost hand.

Action for Upward Pull

Stand free of the wall, and pull upward with the uppermost hand.

Watch Points

Keep the torso gently braced and the spine lengthening at all times. Since this is not a comfortable stretch, you must take your time and relax into it.



Alternatives

What this exercise does

Downward pull stretches the Triceps and the Teres and Latissimus dorsi muscles (you can feel the stretch above to the side of the armpit). The upward pull stretches the Infraspinatus and the front of the deltoid muscles.

Benefits

All the above listed muscles are hard working, but are rarely taken through their full range of movement. Prevent debilitating Trigger point pain from developing in these muscles by doing the Triceps towel stretch.



WALK AROUND THE ARM

Start Position

Stand tall and place the palm of one hand against the wall at shoulder height.

Action 1: Walk into the arm.

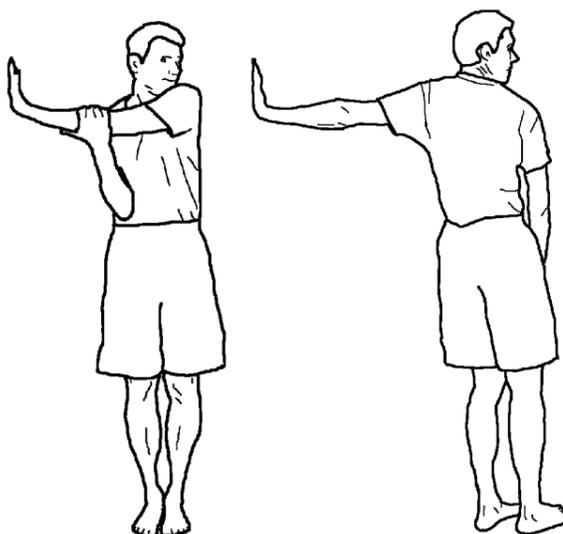
1. Pivot (or walk in a tight circle) until your chest meets the arm that is on the wall and grasp the elbow.
2. Look to the opposite wall and tuck your chin into the shoulder.
3. Grasp a straight elbow into your chest for one or two breaths.
4. Grasp a bent elbow into your chest for one or two breaths.

Action 1: Walk away from the arm.

1. Release the elbow, and (leaving the palm of your hand on the wall), walk away from the arm and look to the opposite wall.
2. Feel your way into this part of the stretch.

Watch Points

Stand tall, and relax into the stretch



Alternatives

If action two (walking away from the arm) is too severe or causes pins and needles in the arm, do it gently, with the knuckles of the hand on the wall and/or for very short periods. If pain is more than mild, don't do it. You may need to consult a Physio about nerve pinch or nerve stretch.

What this exercise does

Action 1:

- Stretches the middle Deltoid, Rhomboid, Infraspinatus and Levator scapulae muscles (whichever most needs it).

Action 2:

- Stretches the Pectoral and anterior Deltoid muscles.
- There is also a very effective stretch of the nerve that runs the length of the arm.

Benefits

The muscles of the shoulder girdle work hard, but rarely through their full range of movement. They will serve you better if you revitalize them with stretching.

Finishing Stretches

BENT STEEPL

Start Position

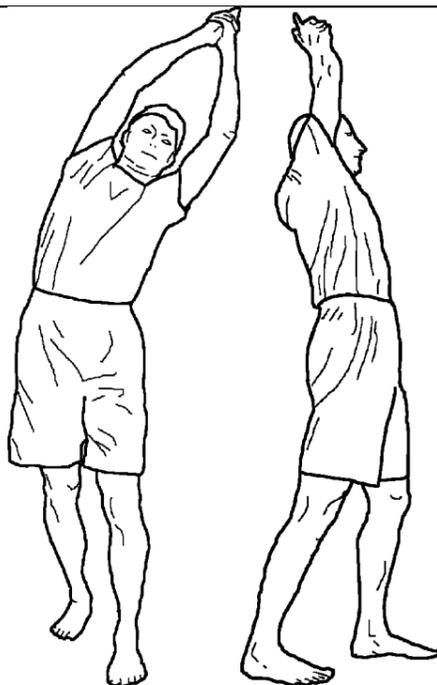
1. Stand with one foot about 3 feet behind the other, and with back knee slightly bent.
2. Clasp your hands above your head with your index fingers long and touching.

Action

1. Gently Zip.
2. Reach very tall, and lean away from the side of the backward leg.
3. To maximize the stretch, breathe into your ribs and then direct the breath down into the side of the abdomen that is being stretched.

Watch Points

Reach the arms very tall - that keeps your back safe.



What this exercise does

1. Stretches the abdominal muscles, especially the internal abdominal obliques.
2. Stretches the intercostal (between the ribs) muscles.
3. Also provides a stretch to the sheets of connective tissue from the finger tip of the index finger all the way down to the outside of the heel.

Benefits

This stretch mimics the total body stretch of the cat waking up from its nap! -

1. Antidote to extreme abdominal exercise (such as Pilates Criss cross).
2. Antidote to prolonged bouts of inactive chair sitting.



WINDMILL ARMS

Start Position

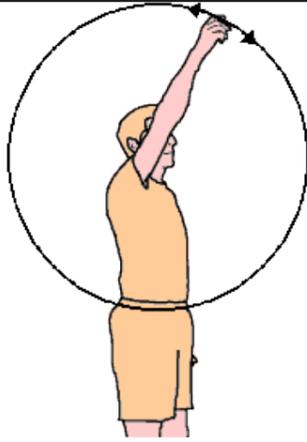
Stand tall with feet apart.

Action

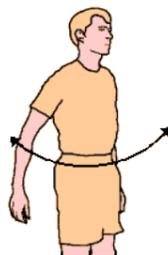
2. Gently zip your lower abdomen.
3. Swing your arms in a circle.
4. Six times forward and six times backward.

Watch Points

Start slow and build up momentum.



Alternative:



Alternatives

- If pain is severe, use smaller circular motion, or just swing the arm back and forth.

What this exercise does

- Loosens the shoulder girdle, and gets the blood flowing.

Benefits

- Great way to start a run or to finish a computer workstation session.

NECK SIDE STRETCH

Cautions: (1) If you have severe neck pain, or have experienced a recent high impact injury such as whiplash, get professional advice (2) Take your time; be gentle!

Start Position

1. Place one hand on the heart and let the arm hang loose at your side.
2. Place the opposite hand over the head in each of the three positions pictured.

Action

(For all three stretch positions)

1. Zip!
2. Breathe into the sides of your ribs and upper back and grow very tall!
3. Roll the shoulder blade down your back.
4. Pull the head in the direction of your elbow. Pause, inhale, relax, exhale deeper into the stretch. Repeat the cycle for one to five breathes.

Watch Points

These stretches work five times better when you apply the Pilates postural instructions – this may be something that you need to learn by hands on instruction from a Pilates instructor.

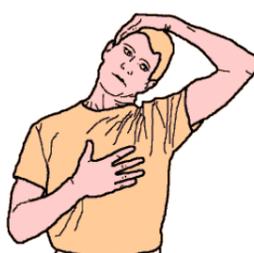
1 - Place your left hand with its index finger on the bump at the back of your head.



2 Place your little finger behind your ear.



3 place your index finger just in front of your ear.



Alternatives

There are not alternatives. If you are having problems, see a Physio or other therapist such as a specialist in Therapeutic massage.

What this exercise does

- Stretches the upper Trapezius and the sternocleidomastoid muscles.

Comments on Aching Pain in the Side of the Head or Neck

If you note such symptoms, this is most likely referred pain from trigger points in the muscles. If it is mild, stretch, and learn to relax. If it is severe, seek the advice of a Physiotherapist or other manual therapist.

Benefit

The real benefit is that you get to know the cause of “tension headache”, namely, trigger points in the upper Trapezius and the sternocleidomastoid muscles. Trigger points in these muscles are very common, and are the result of a common behavioural strategy of holding tension in your neck and shoulders when doing fine work. Doing fine work with your hands does not require the use of these muscles. Learn to “relax your shoulders wide” as you write, type, or peel potatoes. That is when you will find the real benefit of these stretches!

