

YOU  
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## How I STRETCHED myself SLIM

**She transformed her own body with a deep-stretching exercise regime that lengthens the muscles. Now Marja Putkisto is set to straighten out the rest of us, as Sue Carpenter discover.**

The first thing you notice about Marja Putkisto is her super-taut, heart-shaped jaw line — quite unfairly firm for a woman past 40. It proves all the more remarkable when she shows you a picture of herself only five years ago, all cute puffy cheeks and rounded jaw. So, what has gone on, apart from a drastic diet?

“Oh, no diet,” tinkles Marja, in her delightfully melodic voice, the rounded “o”s betraying her Finnish roots. “By chancing my breathing technique, stretching my neck muscles, and finding the correct position for my head, the lymph flow began to work, and I lost the puffiness.” It was the final revelation in the deep-stretching regime she has developed that has transformed her entire body (yes, she has pert buttocks, too) and could revolutionise yours — Method Putkisto.

Although the method will be news to most of us in Britain, Marja, a movement and dance specialist and Pilates teacher, started developing it about 17 years ago, initially for herself, and then with her students at the Finnish National Opera and Sibelius University of Music. She has been teaching it privately in London for the past 12 years.

“You wouldn’t believe how I used to look,” says Marja (pronounced Maria). “I had puffy calves, big hips and thighs — I was fit and fat, I stored water. I don’t think there’s a single bone in the same place now. I worked with the students intensively over four years, and everything about them changed too — their voices, their metabolisms, their ribcages, their looks. “It all began because of the difficulties Marja was experiencing doing certain movements. “In ballet lessons I tried so hard, and always my results were so poor,” she says. “I had these blind spots. One day, when I was 25, I was at a voice workshop and we had to breath into our lower back. I couldn’t feel anything. I was so upset that I started to investigate. It was then that found out that I was born with a displaced hip and spent my first eight months with my legs forced out at right angles. My body was off-centre. Outside I looked a normal, healthy, good-looking girl. But inside I felt something was not in the right place.”

Marja consulted libraries, physiotherapists and osteopaths, before hitting upon the simple answer: if she could stretch the shortened muscles that constricted her hip, she could stretch the shortened muscles that constricted her hip, she could feel it and become more mobile. Thus was born Method Putkisto. Unlike conventional exercise, which can actually shorten the muscles (the muscle’s function is only to contract), her method opens and lengthens muscles.

In most of us, certain muscle groups have never been elongated to their full potential, and so have grown thick, inelastic and short. Not only does this inhibit our physical performance (try working an old-fashioned water pump with a half-size handle), it also results in poor circulation and dire posture.

If I may offer myself as a prime example of British womanhood, this is Marja’s assessment of me: from sitting hunched over my computer, my neck and deeper pectoral muscles are short, making my shoulders tensed rounded. From slumping and breathing from the upper chest, my ribcage is low. My lower back muscles are short which pushes my ribcage forward and, aided by my short hip flexors and deeper buttock muscles, makes my bottom and tummy stick out, Oh, and my dead juts forward, which prevents blood circulation in my head. “No wonder you feel sleepy at your desk,” laughs Marja.

But, she promises, Method Putkisto will lift my ribcage, elongate my waist, relax my shoulders, realign my pelvis and, through increased circulation to the legs, help eliminate cellulite. Certainly Marja’s before and after pictures are convincing — student after student is featured, transformed from droopingly apologetic to firm and flexible. The remedy is simple but, as I have discovered over the past two months, akin to being put on the rack. It involves deep stretching — and holding those stretches for several unbearably long minutes — to elongate the muscles and bring more mobility to the body. It’s like yoga without the spirituality or the fancy position names, but with more focus and isolation of individual muscles, particularly the smaller ones that are often overlooked when doing basic stretches.

“You have to concentrate on one muscle at a time, to rally connect with it,” Marja explains. “It is more precisely.” She also provides a greater degree of theory, with diagrams of muscle groups and breathing technique, so that you know exactly what you’re aiming for. “There is nothing mystical about it,” says Marja. “I just want to give people independence over their bodies.”

This is an important point. In Britain we tend to jump from fad to fad and hope for a wonder cure. “In Finland,” says Marja, “you like your body and you want to look after it and keep it healthy — not just change it into a different shape. If you have a problem, you solve it. If the muscles are preventing you from moving painlessly, you stretch them.”

Usually there's more than one way to skin a cat. To pull my shoulders down and back, for example, personal trainers have advised me to strengthen my upper back muscles through weight training. But Marja cites the dancers she taught, who were supremely toned and fit, but still did not have optimum flexibility — because their muscles were too short. No amount of building up other muscles can alter that.

Her method is, she suggests, the foundation for other exercise techniques, the one you should do first, to realign your body, before taking up Pilates or yoga or athletics. “The good news,” she adds, “is once you've elongated the muscles, they don't spring back. You just have to do ordinary 30-second stretches after exercising to maintain them.”

I started out the reluctant student. Some of Marja's clients had changed noticeably in just two months, but I suspected they were the ones who did two or three sessions a week plus homework. I found it initially difficult to get into position and locate the muscle in question — my right side was one big blind spot. But after six weeks of one to two sessions a week, I felt a sudden shift in gear. I now slot into position more readily, my back is stronger and I can unroll my previously rigid spine, vertebra by vertebra; my ribcage has lifted a little, my breathing is deeper — which in itself strengthens back and abdominal muscles — and I am generally more aware of my posture.

So why haven't we heard of Marja Putkisto before? Probably because she hasn't tried to sell herself. She teaches footballers, ballet dancers and opera singers but, as yet, no celebrities. She came to London 12 years ago to study choreography and ended up marrying a half-English, half-Irish engineer and staying. “I love England,” says Marja, “but the British are very critical and it takes time to build up trust. “Until now she has concentrated on private tuition at her studio, a calming space that has taken over the ground floor of her house in Southwest London.

Now Marja says, she is ready to spread the word. She is training other teachers (which is how I found out about her — through my trainer, Martin Christie, who is one of five qualified teachers who work closely with her), holding workshops at the trendy Sanderson Hotel in central London, and has brought out a video. Surely it can't be long before Madonna and Geri beat a path to her door?

## Target muscles to stretch

- Diaphragm, to lift ribcage, lengthen waistline, improve energy and relaxation levels.
- Deep thigh muscles, deep buttock muscles inner thigh muscles, inner thigh muscles and hamstrings, to realign tilt of pelvis, open lower back, lift buttocks, increase circulation and reduce cellulite.
- Lower back muscles, to lengthen waist.
- Pectorals, to open chest and shoulder line, lift breasts, expand breathing capacity, increase circulation to head, reduce tiredness and tension.
- Neck and facial muscles, to lift face and neck, release tension, increase circulation.

## How to achieve a deeper stretch

- Isolate a single muscle and imagine it lengthening.
- Inhale and exhale deeply using the diaphragm.
- Be aware of space around you and your movement within three dimensions.
- Apply sufficient weight, using either your own body weight or a partner's.
- Hold the stretch for two minutes, building up to five, to allow the muscle to become passive, then stretch beyond its normal length