

The STRETCH SECRET

Stretching isn't just for the gym. Right now, it's being hailed the latest way to treat everything from indigestion to depression

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Who would have guessed that your morning stretch or post-gym cool-down could be doing far more than easing your muscles? A wide variety of therapies have embraced different forms of stretching to prevent and treat health complaints. Some stretch therapies are relaxing and meditative, while others are more active and energising, but they all bring huge benefits aside from the fact that they make you go 'aaah...'

We asked the experts to recommend the health-promoting stretches that every woman should try.

Best stretch for... the blues

HATHA YOGA

WHY? Recent studies show that backbends open your chest, allowing your breath to flow more freely, reversing the shallow breathing associated with depression, says Amy Weintraub, author of *Yoga For Depression* (www.yogafordepression.com). 'Inversions, too, have been shown to lift your mood, perhaps because turning upside down boosts blood circulation, enhancing the flow of oxygen and glucose - the building blocks for neurotransmitters like serotonin and dopamine - to the brain.' There's evidence, too - Russian and US studies have proven yoga boosted the mood of depressed patients.

TRY THE DOWNWARD FACING DOG

- Starting on your hands and knees, fingers spread wide, lift your tailbone and straighten your knees until you are standing with your hands on the ground with your body in an inverted V shape. Feel the stretch along the backs of your legs, and allow your chest to drop between your shoulders, keeping your middle back strong, looking towards your navel.
- Take five deep breaths through your nostrils, and note the sensations in your body. Focusing on your breath and on physical sensations can help to break the negative-thought cycle associated with the blues. Return to your hands and knees, and repeat three or four times.

Best stretch for... tight legs

ACTIVE ISOLATED STRETCHING (AIS)

WHY? 'This gentle stretching method lengthens short, tight muscles,' says Joanna Peyton-Jones, senior therapist at Stretch Therapy (020 7731 1800; www.stretchtherapy.co.uk). 'Muscles work in pairs - when one muscle is contracted the opposing one has to relax. For instance, when your quads are contracted, your hamstrings are "switched off", which means they are relaxed and can be safely stretched and lengthened. Each stretch is assisted by a rope and held for only two seconds.'

TRY THE HAMSTRING STRETCH

- Lie on your back. Bend your right leg. Bring your straight left leg up as high as you can.
- Bend your left knee and put a rope or cloth belt around your foot, holding both ends.
- From this 90° bent-knee position, keep your knee still and bring your foot up to the ceiling, straightening out your leg. Keep your bottom on the floor. When you can bring your leg no higher, gently pull on the rope and feel your hamstring stretch. Hold for two seconds. Don't let your knee snap back as you take away the power of the stretch.
- Release and repeat 15 times. Swap legs.

Best stretch for... back pain

THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE (AT)

WHY? AT is extremely effective for treating back pain, according to a recent University of Southampton study. 'This position lets gravity do the work,' says Liz Dougson, an AT teacher in west London (020 8994 9527; www.ateacher.co.uk). 'It lets your spine lengthen and your back and neck muscles find length without straining.'

TRY LENGTHENING IN SEMI-SUPINE POSITION

- Lie flat on your back on a carpeted floor, knees bent and feet resting on the floor hip-width apart. Rest your head on a telephone directory, about 2in to 3in deep. Your head should be supported without your neck bending backwards or your chin tucking into your chest.
- Let your elbows rest on the floor while placing your hands lightly, palm down, on your lower chest. Allow your spine to lengthen, feeling your back and neck muscles relax and sink into the floor. Rest in this position for about 15 to 20 minutes.
- To finish, roll over slowly to one side and then on to your hands and knees. Stand up gently, leaving your neck long and soft. Your body should feel lighter and your shoulders wider.

Best stretch for... headaches

PHYSIOTHERAPY

WHY? Physiotherapy can be an effective treatment for tension headaches, which are characterised by persistent low-intensity pain in your forehead and upper neck. This particular stretch eases your neck muscles (tight neck muscles often cause headaches). 'It's important to focus specifically on the sub-occipital muscles in your neck that tighten due to a forward head posture, which is often the result of sitting slouched at a computer,' says Cameron Tudor, musculoskeletal physiotherapist at West London Physiotherapy (020 7937 1628; www.westlondonphysio.co.uk). Using this stretch three or four times a day should help prevent tension headaches.

TRY A NECK STRETCH

- Place your thumbs over your cheekbones, and your fingers around the base of your skull.
- Push down with your thumbs and up with your fingers, until you feel a gentle stretch. Hold for 30 seconds, then release.
- If you experience symptoms of dizziness or blurred vision, stop immediately. If you have a tension headache that persists for more than a week, see your GP or visit a specialist physiotherapist. →