

Scottish Muscle Network

Patient Information Leaflet

Benefits of stretching in neuromuscular disorders

A stretching guide to complement your daily stretching practise

Stretches

This information booklet is a reminder of the stretches you have done in clinic, on the ward, at your home appointment or discussed over the phone / e-mail. You may have been asked to do all these stretches or perhaps your therapist has picked out a few of them for a more targeted stretching practice. If you have been doing these stretches for a while and perhaps feel they are now no longer meeting your needs, please contact your local physiotherapist and these stretches can be modified to ensure you are still getting the most out of your stretching practice.

Benefits of stretching

- improves circulation
- improves muscle recovery
- improves pain
- relaxes tight muscles
- improves muscle asymmetry
- improves flexibility
- helps prevent injury
- improves stamina and energy levels
- improves body awareness
- improves posture
- improves muscle efficiency

When do I stretch?

Stretch when muscles are warm such as when you get out of bed, after a bath, when you have been active such as doing housework, or come back from a walk. You can stretch after any form of activity.

How long do I stretch for?

If you are trying to improve a tight muscle group, aim to stretch that muscle group for one minute. You can do this by holding the stretch for 3 periods of 20 seconds or 2 periods of 30 seconds. If you are stretching to maintain a muscle group, then hold the stretch for 20 seconds. If you are recovering from a muscle injury or trying to improve a muscle group, we may ask you to stretch 2 -3 times per day.

How often should I stretch?

If you can, it is best to aim to stretch every day. Even on days where you are fatigued, you can still stretch your hands for example, so you are still participating in your stretching practise. If you miss a day then don't worry, just ease yourself back in when you can. This is also true after any illness; join back in when you can. It is good to remember the 80:20 rule. It's what you do 80% of the time that makes a difference, and this is true of stretching. If you stretch on most days of the week a day, it will make a difference.

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Where should I stretch?

You can stretch anywhere you feel comfortable. It doesn't have to be in a specific place in your home or at the gym. You can do your stretches all together or spread them out through the day. Some people like to add a stretch with an activity they do daily to help them remember and form a new habit. For example, some people will do a calf stretch whilst they are brushing their teeth; a quadriceps stretch when they are waiting on their tea or a hand stretch when they are watching TV. It's entirely up to you. The key is just to do them and to be consistent. To view these stretches online, please go to:

www.smn.scot.nhs.uk/patients-and-families/education/

Let's start by getting into the correct position. Make sure you are sitting on a firm chair like a dining chair with your thighs fully supported and feet flat on the floor. A firm chair is best as it will give your pelvis more support than a softer seat. If the chair is too high, you may wish to put a step underneath, but it will need to be large enough for you to undertake the full leg stretch. If your sofa is a better height, it may be best to sit on that. Although it may not be as firm as a dining room chair, it is important that your feet are flat on the floor.

Breath cycles

A breath cycle is when we take one large breath in and then exhale slowly. We breathe in through our nose and at the same time, push out our tummy button. This engages our diaphragm and helps us get more oxygen to our muscles to help us get the most out of our stretching practice. We then breathe out slowly through our mouth making sure the speed of the breath at the end is the same as the speed of the breath at the beginning of the exhalation. This **controlled breath** will engage our abdominals and breathing muscles. Try three breath cycles before you start your stretches.

1. Hamstring stretch

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Sit towards the edge of a chair with feet flat on the floor. Straighten one leg (you may not be able to fully straighten your leg, and this is okay) and place your hands on the leg that is bent. On the straight leg, pull your toes up towards you and straighten the knee as best you can. You will feel a stretch at the back of the thigh (hamstrings).

Hold the stretch for three breath cycles.

To progress this stretch, straighten the knee and pull the toes up on the leg in front by activating the muscles in the leg. With a straight back, lean forward into the stretch from the hips and exhale. Hold the stretch and repeat for three breath cycles or as long as you are able.



You can loop a belt around your ankle to increase the stretch at your foot if the muscles on the front of your leg are a little weaker e.g. you may have a drop foot.



Now repeat this stretch with your toes pointing down towards the floor. This will stretch the front of your ankle.

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2. Heel / toe

Lift your toes up towards your face and then push your toes down toward the floor lifting the heel. Each time you pull your toes up and push them down, try to increase the range of motion. This is an active stretch for your ankles and lower legs.



3. Quadriceps stretch

Lying face down (or standing if preferred with the help of a chair) take hold of your ankle and pull your ankle towards your hips. If you are unable to reach your ankle, it may be easier with the help of a belt, yoga strap (or dogs' lead!) around your ankle. You might also be able to pull on the leg of your trousers. Tighten your stomach muscles if you are standing to keep your lower back straight. Bend your knee and pull the band with both hands if needed, until you feel the stretch on the front of your thigh. If you are able to lie on your front, you may be able to do this when you get into bed or before you get out of bed in the morning.

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Hold for three breath cycles and repeat 3 times. To progress this stretch, you can push your hips further into the floor or further forward if you are standing.



If preferred, here is an alternative way to stretch the quads in sitting.



4. Inner thigh stretch

Sit up tall in your chair with shoulders pushed down. Take your right leg out to the side as far as is comfortable. Hold for three breath cycles and repeat on each side three times.

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5. Inner thigh and gluts stretch



Place one leg over the other and allow the knee to fall out to the side. Sit up straight with shoulders down and hold for three breath cycles.

6. Calf stretch

Stand on your bottom step with both heels over the edge. Hold on to a support.

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Relax into this stretch and let the weight of your body stretch your heels towards the floor. Hold for three breath cycles. Alternatively, stand in a walking position with the leg to be stretched straight behind you and the other leg bent in front of you. Take support from a wall or chair. Lean your body forwards until you feel the stretching in the calf of the straight leg. Make sure your back foot is pointing forward and there is a straight line from your shoulder, through your hip and knee to the foot.

To deepen this stretch you can take your back leg further behind you pushing your heel down to the floor. Hold for three breath cycles and repeat three times on each side.

7. Side neck stretch

Place your hands on your lap or on the arms of your chair. Push your left elbow and hand down into your lap / arm of chair or down by your side and push your left shoulder down. Slowly take your right ear down to your right shoulder and hold for three breath cycles. Repeat three times to both sides.



8. Neck rotation

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Sitting up tall in your chair with shoulders pushed down, turn your head to one side until you feel a stretch. Using the hand on the side you are turning towards you can deepen the stretch if desired by gently pushing your head further round if comfortable. Hold for three breath cycles and repeat three times to each side.



9. Chest and shoulder stretch

Take both hands behind your head and push the elbows outwards. Squeeze your shoulder blades together and downwards and feel the stretch across your shoulders and chest. Do this for three breath cycles and repeat three times.



10. Triceps stretch

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Sit up tall in your chair with shoulders pushed down. Take your left hand across your body. Take your right hand and place it just above your left elbow and gently ease the arm across a little more. Hold for three breath cycles and repeat three times on each side.



11. Upper body and shoulder stretch

Clasp your hands together and take hands above your head and push towards the ceiling. Feel the stretch into your waist, stretching out in between each of your ribs. To progress the stretch, turn the palms of your hands towards the ceiling and this will also stretch your wrist and fingers. Hold for three breath cycles and repeat three times.



12. Alternative shoulder stretch

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Many people are unable to take their hands above their head and this is an alternative stretch. Clasp your hands together and on a table / breakfast bar, reach them as far forward as is comfortable pushing from the shoulders. You don't need to lean too far forward as it's the shoulders we are stretching here. Hold for three breath cycles and slide them back. Repeat three times.



13. Shoulder abduction

Place your upper arm on a table. You may wish to pop a couple of pillows under your arm to raise it if your table isn't high enough. Let the shoulders drop down and on your next exhale, slide the arm forwards on the table and then slide it backwards. Repeat five times with each arm.



14. Wrist and forearm stretch

Lean against a wall with straight arms and fingers turned upwards. Slowly slide your hands down until you can feel the stretch on the inside of your forearm. Alternatively, in sitting you can do this stretch in prayer pose pushing the heels of your hand and fingertips together.

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Alternatively, stand leaning on a table with straight arms, palms against a table and fingers.

Shift your body weight forwards until you can feel the stretch on the inside of your forearms. Hold for three breath cycles and repeat three times.

15. Side stretch

Reach slowly down towards the floor with your left hand. It doesn't matter if you can't touch the floor, just reach as far as is comfortable. You may want to hold on to the side of the chair with your right hand to help stabilise if you feel unsteady on the chair. Hold the stretch for three breath cycles and repeat three times to each side. If you want to deepen the stretch, you can place the right hand behind your head.



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16. Rotation

Sit up tall in your chair with your shoulders down. Place your left hand on the outside of your right knee and gently turn around and look over your left shoulder. Hold for three breath cycles, gently deepening the stretch with each breath out. Repeat three times to each side.



17. Posture stretch

Sit up nice and tall in your chair pressing down through your feet on the floor. Push your shoulders down. Now try and sit even taller whilst arching your back. Tuck your chin in slightly and lengthen up through the top of your head really lengthening from the base of your spine.



Next pull your tummy in and push the arch of your back into the chair and round your shoulders down. With a deep breath sit up straight and let the breath fill your lungs and take you up back into the start position. Exhale your breath and round down. Repeat this movement five or six times enjoying the full movement in your back.

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18. Crossing midline

Sit up tall in your chair and push your shoulders down. Take a deep breath in and on the exhale take your left elbow to the outside of your right knee. Inhale and sit up straight. Repeat to the other side. Do this exercise 5 times to each side.



19. Forward flexion

Sit up tall in your chair with your shoulders down and back. Next place your hands on your knees and on your next breath out, slowly slide your hands forward until you reach the floor. Allow your head to relax into this position. Hold this position for three breath cycles and on the inhale slowly come back to the upright position.



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Summary

You should be able to feel these stretches in the muscle group you are stretching. It may feel uncomfortable, but this should stop when you let the stretch go. If it is painful, then you are stretching too far, and you should consult your therapist. For more information, please contact your local therapist:

Name:

Contact: