

The Flexibility Self-Test

Performing a stretch that involves more than one muscle group makes it difficult to determine which muscle is tight or which ones cause limited range of motion. For example, you may have heard of the "sit and reach" test - where you sit on the floor with your legs straight out in front of you, and you bend forward while someone measures with a ruler how far you can reach toward your toes (you may have done this test in school; it's a popular test on Fitness Day). Even though this test is common for flexibility, I'm not a big fan of it because it gives you very little information - it tells you if your muscles are tight or not, but it doesn't tell you which muscles; is it your lower back, your hamstrings, or your calves that are tight? Who knows?

So, my test is different. My stretch test isolates individual muscles to give you the most useful information possible to design your own customized stretching program. At first, the following stretches may seem like a lot, but unfortunately there's no such thing as just a few moves to determine flexibility.

After you completed the self-test, you know exactly what muscles in your body need the most attention. At that point, you can work on specific stretches for the areas you want to work and then choose the exercise(s) that feels most comfortable for your body.

Also, you may notice that most of the stretches test both the right and left sides of your body. It's not uncommon to have one side more flexible than the other, which creates an imbalance, but it's important to try to get both sides of your body equal in flexibility for symmetry, balance, and injury prevention, and this test helps you achieve that goal.

Before you start, I want to give you a few pointers:

You get better results if you warm up before you attempt these tests. Do some simple warm-up exercises. I recommend doing the same warm-up routine every time you do this stretch test - that way you get more consistent and accurate results.

When you retest to check your progress, make sure that you always test in similar situations: time of day, amount of warm-up, workout schedule, and so on. At the end of this document, I have included a Flexibility Self-Evaluation Worksheet to record your findings.

As you perform the stretch, imagine a large clock around you with the center of the clock pinned to the axis of the stretch. For instance, when standing up and twisting, the clock would be on the ground, directly beneath the centerline of your body - around you are stretching. Midnight would be looking straight ahead. If you're sitting on the ground leaning forward, the clock would be centered on your hip, the axis of your stretch. Midnight would be when you're sitting up straight.

Let the testing begin!

Neck

The chin-to-chest neck stretch gives you an idea of how tight the muscles are in your neck. To test the muscles in this area, stretch following the steps below:

1. Sit up tall in a chair with your back straight, arms at your sides, and your shoulders down.
2. Don't round your back forward.
3. Inhale and as you exhale drop your chin down toward your chest, as shown below.
4. Make a note on your Flexibility Self-Evaluation Worksheet at what place on the clock face the top of your head points.



Imagine that the clock face is centered on the outside of your shoulder.

- 1:00 is tight
- 2:00 is a healthy range of motion
- 3:00 is very flexible

Shoulders

This simple movement can tell you a lot about the range of motion in your shoulders. To do this test stretch, follow these steps:

1. Stand up tall with your back straight, your abdominals lifted, your shoulders down, and your arms to your side.
2. Inhale and as you exhale lift your right arm straight forward, moving it as far over-head as you can (picture below).
3. Remember to keep your shoulders down and don't let your back arch. Stop moving if you feel pain in your shoulder.



Make a note on your Flexibility Self-Evaluation Worksheet at what place on the clock face your hand points.

- 10:00 is tight
 - 12:00 is a healthy range of motion
 - 1:00 is very flexible
- Repeat this stretch with your left arm and mark your results on the worksheet.
- 2:00 is tight
 - 12:00 is a healthy range of motion
 - 11 :00 is very flexible

Chest

To test the flexibility of your chest, follow these steps:

1. Stand up tall with your back straight, your abdominals lifted, your shoulders down, and your arms at your sides.
2. Inhale and bring your arms straight out in front of you at chest height.
3. Exhale and open your arms to the side (palms facing forward) as far as you can without arching your back (see picture).
4. Keep your shoulder blades down and stable.



Make a note on your worksheet at what place on the clock your hands point.

10:00 and 2:00 are tight

9:00 and 3:00 are a healthy range of motion

8:00 and 4:00 are very flexible

Trunk

A healthy back has a balanced range of motion in four directions: forward, side, rotation, and back. Isolating the muscles of your trunk can be difficult because many muscles are involved in the complex movement of your spine; therefore, there are four test stretches in this section to measure the range of motion in your trunk as a whole.

Seated rotation

To do this test stretch, follow these steps:

1. Sit up tall in a chair with your back straight, your abdominals lifted, and your shoulders down.
2. Place your left arm on the outside of your right thigh and your right hand on the back seat of your chair. This position helps you turn your upper body at the waist in the next step.
3. Inhale and as you exhale twist at your waist as if you were trying to look behind you. This position is shown in the picture on the next page. Remember to keep both shoulders down and to look out in front of you, not at the floor.



Make a note on the Flexibility Self-Evaluation Worksheet at what place on the clock your chest faces.

1:00 is tight

2:00 is a healthy range of motion

3:00 is very flexible

Repeat this stretch by rotating to your left side and record the results on your worksheet.

11 :00 is tight

10:00 is a healthy range of motion

9:00 is very flexible

Standing side bend

To do this test stretch, follow these steps:

1. Stand with your feet hip-width apart and your back straight, abdominals lifted, and your shoulders down.
2. Place your right hand overhead and your left arm to your side (see picture).
3. Inhale and as you exhale bend to the left side, reaching the fingers on your left hand down the side of your leg .
4. Try to keep your shoulders and hips facing the front, avoiding even the slightest rotation in the spine.



Make a note on the Flexibility Self-Evaluation Worksheet at what place on the clock face the top of your head points to.

1:00 is tight

2:00 is healthy range of motion

3:00 is very flexible

Repeat this stretch on your other side (to stretch the left side).

11 :00 is tight

10:00 is healthy range of motion

9:00 is very flexible

Seated forward bend

A tight upper or lower back limits your range of motion. To do this test stretch, follow these steps:

1. Sit on a chair with your feet flat on the floor (see picture).
2. Inhale and as you exhale round forward as far as you comfortably can, bending at your hips.

Make a note on the Flexibility Self-Evaluation Worksheet at what place on the clock face the back of your head points to.

1:00 is tight

2:00 is healthy range of motion

3:00 is very flexible



Standing back extension

You may have tight abdominals if this stretch is difficult. To do this test stretch, follow these steps:

1. Stand up tall with your back straight, your abdominals lifted, and your shoulders down with your arms to your sides and your feet apart.
2. Inhale and as you exhale move your shoulders back, lifting your chest and eyes toward the ceiling without compressing your lower back.
3. Think of keeping your spine long. Picture below shows you how to keep from compressing your back. You can also put your hands on your lower back for support.

Make a note on your worksheet at what point on the clock your head stops moving.

Between 12:00 and 11:00 is tight

Between 11:00 and 10:00 is a healthy range of motion

Between 10:00 and 9:00 is very flexible



Quadriceps

This stretch tests the flexibility in your quadriceps (front of your thighs). Knowing where your tightness lies allows you to focus on stretches that improve your range of motion in this muscle group.

To stretch your quads, follow these steps:

1. Stand up tall and place your left hand on a stable surface.

Your surface can be a chair, wall, doorway, or fence - anything that's sturdy and helps you keep your balance in the next steps.

2. Inhale and lift your right foot behind you and grab hold of your ankle or the top of your foot with your right hand (see picture below).
3. Exhale and gently move your knee back, trying to line it up next to your left knee. Don't force your heel to touch your right buttocks.

Make a note on your Flexibility Self-Evaluation Worksheet at what place on the clock your knee points.

8:00 is very tight

7:00 is tight

6:00 is good flexibility

Repeat this stretch on your left side.



Hamstrings

To do this test stretch, you need a towel or stretching strap. Then follow these steps:

1. Lie down on the floor with your legs straight out in front of you and your arms to your sides.
2. Bring your right foot toward your chest and wrap a strap or towel around the arch of your foot (see picture).
3. Inhale and as you exhale extend your right leg toward the ceiling.

Try to keep your right leg as straight as possible and your hips on the floor. If it's more comfortable for you, you can bend your left leg so that your foot is on the floor but it's important to try to keep your right leg straight, even if it is not straight up to the ceiling. Remember, you are only evaluating your flexibility, so it's okay if your leg does not go very high. Keep working at it and stretch regularly and you'll soon see improvement.



Make a note on your worksheet at what point your foot stops.

10:00 is tight

12:00 is a healthy range of motion

1:00 is very flexible

Repeat this stretch with your left leg and record those results on your worksheet.

Groin

Groin pulls are often related to improper stretching or tight adductors, and this test reflects your flexibility in your adductors (inner thigh muscles).

This area is often tighter in men than in women because women usually have broader and shallower hips, which give them a potential for greater range of motion in this area.

To do this test stretch, follow these steps:

1. Lie down on the floor with your legs straight out in front of you and your arms to your sides.
2. Inhale and as you exhale move your legs out to the side as far as you comfortably can. Remember when you were little and you used to make snow angels? You move your legs out like you were making an angel but without moving your arms. See picture for additional help.

Make a note on your worksheet at what place on the clock your feet point.

7:00 and 5:00 are tight

8:00 and 4:00 are healthy range of motion

9:00 and 3:00 are very flexible



Glutes

To do this test stretch, follow these steps:

1. Sit up tall in a chair with your back straight, your abdominals lifted, and your shoulders down.
2. Place your left ankle on your right quad just above your knee and gently press your knee toward the floor with your left hand as you bend forward at the hip and tilt your pelvis back. Check out the picture below if you need help visualizing this stretch. Remember to keep your opposite hip on the seat of your chair and your back straight. Look out at the floor in front of you, not at your feet.

Make a note at what place on the clock face your knee stops moving.

1:00 is tight

2:00 is a healthy range of motion

3:00 is very flexible

Repeat this stretch with your right leg.

11:00 is tight

10:00 is a healthy range of motion

9:00 is very flexible



Calves

Having tight calf muscles can affect not only your range of motion in your ankle but also your walking and running strides. If your calf muscles are tight and you can't get full range of motion in your ankles with this test stretch, then this lack of motion may have a negative effect on your form, in your hip, during walking and running. This imbalance may eventually lead to chronic pain or injury to your knees, hips, or even lower back.

Pay close attention to this area if you wear high heels all day. Stretching this area can help you keep your ankles, feet, and hips in balance.

To do this test stretch, follow these steps:

1. Sit on the floor with your right leg straight out in front of you and your left leg bent so the bottom of your left foot rests against the inside thigh of your right leg.
2. Wrap a towel or stretching strap around the ball of your right foot and gently pull your foot toward you so your toes move toward your knee.

Look at picture on the next page if you need help. Also, make sure to keep your back straight; don't lean forward at your hip. Try to move only your ankle and foot.

Make a note on your Flexibility Self-Evaluation Worksheet at what place on the clock your toes point.

1:00 is tight
 12:00 is a healthy range of motion
 11 :00 is very flexible
 Repeat this stretch with your left foot



Flexibility Self-Evaluation Worksheet

When you finish each stretch record your position in the clock position column.

EXERCISE	SIDE	CLOCK POSITION
Neck	Right	
	Left	
Shoulders	Right	
	Left	
Chest	N/A	
Trunk (4 stretches)		
Seated Rotation	Right	
	Left	
Standing Side Bend	Right	
	Left	
Seated Forward Bend	Right	
	Left	
Standing Back Extension	N/A	
Quadriceps	Right	
	Left	
Hamstrings	Right	
	Left	
Groin	Right	
	Left	
Glutes	Right	
	Left	
Calves	Right	
	Left	