

# STRETCH FOR SUCCESS

## 6 ways to increase your flexibility

Fitness expert Matt Jones recently answered a question in our 'Ask an Expert' segment about stretching. This led to several more questions about stretching in general, so here he's put together a selection of the most effective stretches and a few more tips to assist in your quest for flexibility and injury-prevention.

STORY BY MATT JONES

**S**TRETCHING TIP #1: Stretch your hip-flexors frequently (and properly!)

### The muscle group: hip-flexors

The hip-flexors are a group of muscles located around the hip that work to bring the thigh toward the midsection. They are actually a complex group of muscles (consisting of far more than just the psoas and

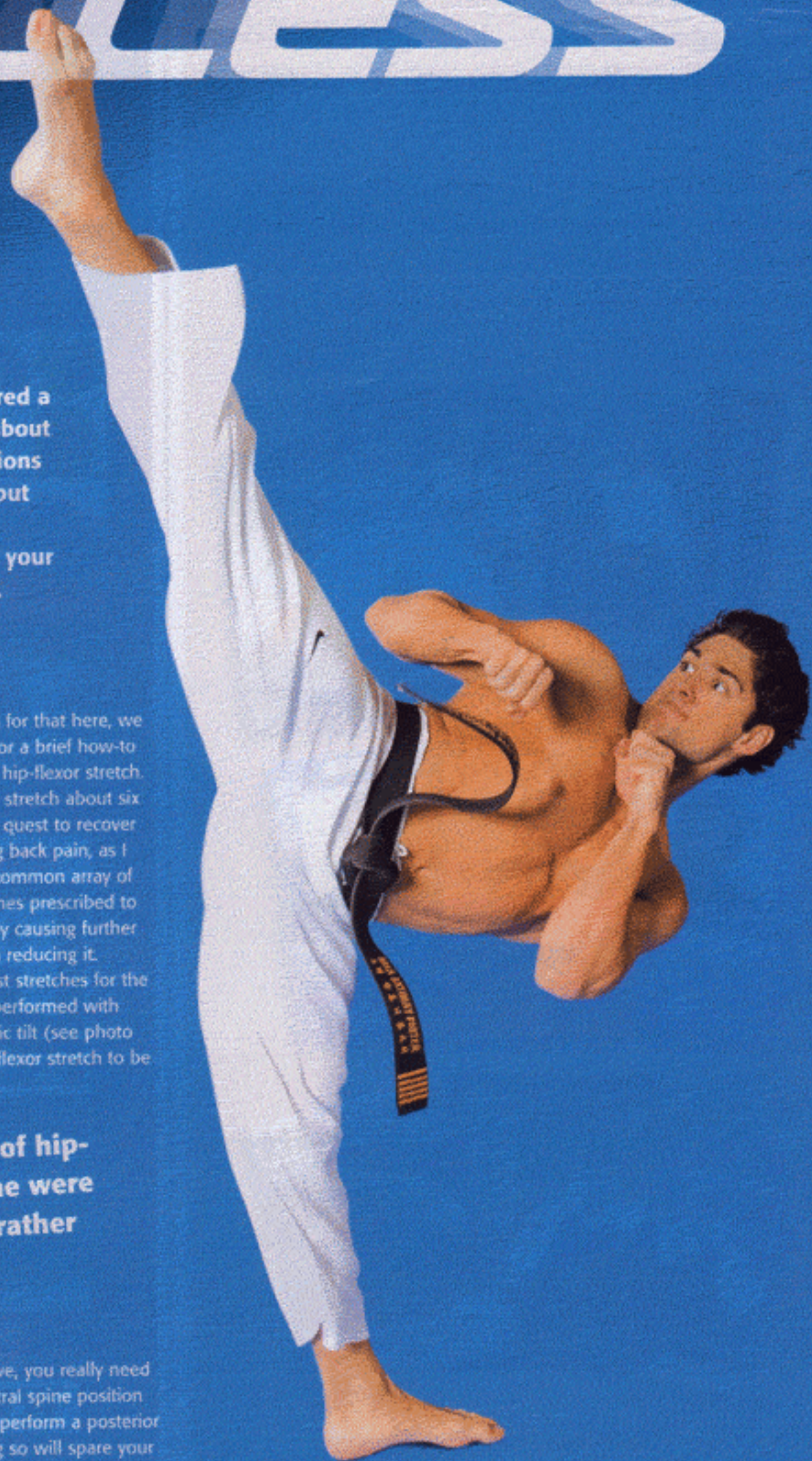
into the reasons for that here, we do have space for a brief how-to on my favourite hip-flexor stretch. I developed this stretch about six years ago in my quest to recover from debilitating back pain, as I found that the common array of hip-flexor stretches prescribed to me were actually causing further pain rather than reducing it.

You see, most stretches for the hip-flexors are performed with an anterior pelvic tilt (see photo one). For a hip-flexor stretch to be

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iliacus muscles, contrary to popular belief) and it's commonly accepted that tight hip-flexors can exacerbate and even cause lower-back pain. Although we can't go

safe and effective, you really need maintain a neutral spine position or, even better, perform a posterior pelvic tilt. Doing so will spare your spine and greatly enhance the





## HIP-FLEXOR STRETCH



**Poorly performed hip flexor stretch.** Note the anterior/forward pelvic tilt & arching back.



**Begin with a flat back.** To begin, simply push your hips through underneath you by performing a pelvic-tilt (drop your hips and tailbone toward the floor while tilting your groin upward).



**End position:** You only have 5-10 degrees of movement available to extend your hip, hence the tiny amount of movement in the hips/pelvis/lumbar area.

effectiveness of the stretch. Follow the instructions with the pics and take a load of pressure off your lower back!

Perform this stretch for 45 seconds on each leg with the toes pointed, then another 45 seconds on each leg with the toes flexed. Perform the stretch every day and on training days, aim to do it both before and after training.

### STRETCHING TIP #2: Stretch your lateral hip-rotators

**The muscle group:**  
**lateral hip-rotators**

The lateral hip-rotators (LHR's) are a group of muscles responsible

for rotating your leg. As shown below, sit down in a chair and then try to flick your right foot out to the side while keeping the back of your thighs flat against the seat,

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those muscles you feel firing in your right butt-cheek while your leg rotates are lateral hip-rotators. Anyhow, when those muscles are

tight, they will greatly restrict your ability to swing your leg through many different movements that are commonly required in martial arts. This will not only compromise

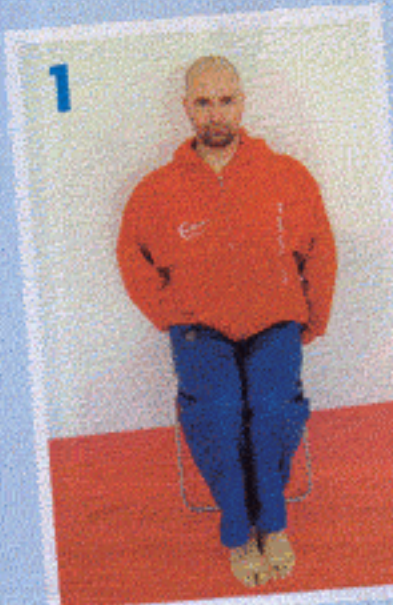
your performance but can be bad for your lower back. Stretching these muscles is actually very easy -- have a look at the LHR stretch

shown in the accompanying photos. Just be sure to keep your sacrum on the floor, otherwise you'll end up cheating and actually be stressing the ligaments in your lower back rather than stretching the LHR muscles.

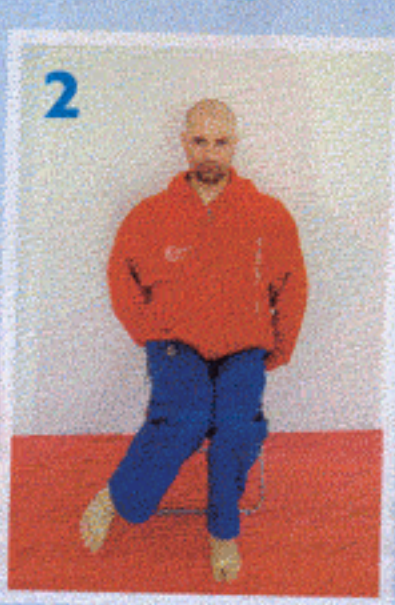
Perform this stretch twice for each leg, holding the stretch for 45 seconds each time. Perform the stretch every day and on training days, perform the stretch both before and after training. Grapplers who want to develop their rubber-guard should do this stretch at least twice a day.

### STRETCHING TIP #3: Stretch your calves

## SEATED LEG-FLICK



**Starting position of seated leg flick (to feel lateral hip-rotators working)**



**End position of the seated leg-flick. Return and repeat on the other side.**

## CALF STRETCH



**Allow about 45 seconds to ease into the bottom position of this stretch. Once there, actively use your shin muscles to pull your toes toward your knee and push your heel down toward the floor. This will significantly increase the depth of the stretch.**



## PUSH-UP CALF STRETCH



**Assume a push-up position and keep a flat back. Cross one leg over the back of the other at the ankle joint.**



**End position: Actively use your shin muscles to pull your toes toward your knee and push your heel down toward the floor. At the same time, shift your hips back and up toward the sky. Keep your back flat throughout.**

### The muscle group: calves

Calf-stretching is often neglected by a lot of athletes and that's a shame because tightness in the calves can create all sorts of problems in other body parts including the shins, feet, hamstrings, glutes and lower back. Actually, a large portion of my work consists of helping elite athletes manage and overcome lower back pain and one of the first things I prescribe for them is a healthy dose of intense calf-stretching. I advise that my clients stretch each of their calves for at least 45 seconds every day, and preferably two or three times per day. Some folks may think this is unnecessary, but I've seen athletes

benefit from it time and time again. Many martial artists will be putting their calves through a great deal of work as most stand-up arts require you to keep your weight on the balls of your feet. Grapplers also work their calves quite vigorously when they bridge, hip-escape or shoot for a takedown. I've provided two options for calf stretches, the one using a step is my preferred method as I find it provides a deeper stretch than other forms, but I've provided the second option in case you don't have access to a step.

Perform this stretch twice for each leg, holding the stretch on each leg for 45 seconds. Perform

the stretch every day and on training days, do it both before and after training.

### STRETCHING TIP #4: Strengthen your deep flexors & neck-extensors

#### Muscle group: deep neck-flexors

This isn't a stretch in the traditional sense, but it will stretch out the muscles in the back of your neck while you simultaneously strengthen some very important muscles that lie in the front of your neck, just below your chin. This is one of the most important exercises for helping to correct

a common postural fault known as 'hey man, your chin sticks out so far that your head enters the room 10 minutes before your body'. Okay, that's not a technical term but it gets the point across much better than fancy anatomical terminology. Let's refer to this postural flaw as a 'jutting chin'. The exercise I use for this is one I call the 'wall chin-press'. For details on how to perform it, just follow the instructions in the accompanying photos. I recommend that pretty much everyone perform the wall chin-press for one-to-two minutes per day, but if you have significant postural issues that see your ears sitting forward of your shoulders, then you may benefit from doing a single one-minute session, five-to-10 times per day.

During your work day it may be possible for you to set yourself the goal of performing a 60-second wall chin-press every time you go to the toilet or get a drink of water. If you work in an environment that won't permit this, you could at least resolve to do it every time you walk through your front door or every time an ad break comes on while watching television. I also recommend that you do this exercise after your training sessions to counteract any

## CHIN-WALL STRETCH



**Assume a position with your butt, lower back, shoulders and head flat against the wall. Keep a slight bend in your knees and your weight through your heels.**



**Maintain the start position and then simply draw your chin in as strongly as you can. You should be giving yourself as many double chins as possible!**

## TRAP STRETCH



**Sit upright in a chair and grab hold of the chair leg on the side that you want to stretch (e.g. to stretch your right upper trapezius, grip the chair with your right hand. Reach down as low as possible while keeping a straight spine. To activate the stretch, simply tilt your head away to the opposite side. To increase the stretch, use your fingers to keep crawling your hand further down the chair leg toward the floor.**





excess tension that may have built up in the back of your neck during the session.

#### **STRETCHING TIP #5: Stretch your traps**

**Muscle group: upper trapezius muscles**

Tightness in your upper traps can be very troublesome for two reasons:

1. It can cause general neck tightness and tension (which can also lead to headaches).
2. If left unchecked, the upper trap tightness can eventually cause other postural problems.

Stretching your traps is actually quite easy and doesn't even require you to get out of your chair, so check out the pics and give it a go. Doing this exercise every day would be ideal, or you can even just do it at times when your traps are feeling a little tight. Remember, the obvious thing is to keep in mind is that prevention is always better than cure, therefore I would still lean toward the daily approach. Do the stretch twice on each side and hold it for 45 seconds each time.

#### **STRETCHING TIP #6: Stretch your quadratus lumborum**

**Muscle group: quadratus lumborum**

The quadratus lumborum are a pair of muscles located at either side of lower back. They can work independently to laterally flex your spine (i.e. bend you

sideways at the waist) or they can work in harmony to extend the spine (i.e. bend your torso backwards at the waist). Keeping your quadratus lumborum flexible and healthy will help your mobility, reduce tension in

trap stretch because the two stretches are remarkably similar. Just make sure that on both stretches you prevent yourself from putting a lot of pressure in your lower back by pulling yourself into the chair too firmly.

**A flexible quadratus lumborum will help your mobility, reduce tension in your lower back, and help you generate more force with your core.**

your lower back, and help you generate more force with your core.

This quadratus lumborum stretch is a piece of cake after you've performed the upper-

Keep in mind that your spine doesn't handle pressure nearly as well when seated as it does when you are standing, so only use the chair to assist you in getting the stretch working.

### **QUADRATUS LUMBORUM STRETCH**



Stretch your left quadratus lumborum by tilting/crunching to your right side, pulling yourself down with your right hand. Note how the left arm (the arm on the side that's being stretched) is positioned. This arm/hand position adds to the stretch. Bend at your waist as if you were crunching up your ribs to tilt your whole upper body away from the chair leg. Swap sides and repeat.

Do this stretch with the same frequency as the trap stretch.

There you have it: six stretching tips that should really help you to improve your health, flexibility and performance. If you do them regularly, you will greatly benefit your posture and also reduce your chance of injury. That's a pretty good return on investment for something that doesn't take a long time to perform, doesn't require any expensive equipment and requires very little physical exertion.

*Matt Jones is an accredited strength and conditioning coach with over 12 years of experience in the fitness industry. He is also the founder of ISO Health in Adelaide and Australian Director for Jim Wagner's Reality-Based Personal Protection (RBPP) system. **BLITZ***

### **LATERAL HIP-ROTATOR STRETCH**



Begin with your sacrum (the flat boney area just above the top of your butt) flat on floor, and the supporting foot on the floor. Cross the other leg over the support leg, just above the knee.



Bring your supporting knee back toward you while keeping your sacrum flat on the floor. This will stretch out your lateral hip-rotators.



To alleviate pressure on the knee ligaments, the near hand gently pulls on the thigh, just above the knee (i.e. on the hip side of the knee).