

# 10 Ways to Stretch Tight Calf Muscles

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I have to thank my anonymous tipper, for this article came as a result of that person's request. Yes, it's true, many of us suffer from tight calf muscles at least some of the time. Some of this comes simply from our daily walking and other movements, as well as genetic predispositions. But factors that can aggravate matters include wearing high-heeled shoes, running and other cardiovascular activities, and maneuvering in the snow and ice. And if you're among those of us who can say "guilty as charged" for all of the above, it's little wonder if you find yourself constantly battling cranky calves!

Unfortunately, tight calf muscles aren't just uncomfortable in of themselves; having tight calves can affect the health of your feet, knees, hips, low back and even your shoulders. This is because tightness in the calves often exacerbates tightness in the hamstrings, which in turn can throw your whole pelvis and back out of alignment during your everyday activities, which in turn puts a different load on your back and knee, which in turn causes you to use your upper body muscles differently....well, you get the idea. It really is true, the ankle bone CAN be connected to the shoulder bone, albeit via a long and winding road.

Additionally, tight calf muscles put you at greater risk for ankle injuries and shin splints, and problems with your feet, including plantar fasciitis, a painful and potentially debilitating inflammation on the bottom of the foot.



The good news is, whether you're already experiencing any of these problems or simply wishing to prevent them, a great deal can be accomplished just by loosening the calf muscles through proper stretching. But there are a few key points to observe before getting started:

- ✓ Always check with your doctor if you are in pain or are injured before launching into any stretch or exercise program, to ensure it is safe to do so.
- ✓ Never force a stretch or perform it if it causes pain. Note, though, that while pain is to be avoided, in order for the stretch to be effective, a certain sensation of mild discomfort – that feeling of being stretched – is to be expected. It's important you stay alert so that you can distinguish the difference between the two.
- ✓ When you get into a stretch – and you begin to feel the stretch sensation described above, it's important to **HOLD THE STRETCH** for at least 20-30 seconds, breathing smoothly and concentrating on trying to let the muscle(s) relax. To stop the stretch before any sense of release takes place is like ending a run as soon as you begin to break a sweat; you haven't provided the impetus needed for the body to make the positive training changes you're seeking.
- ✓ If time permits, I highly encourage you repeat the stretch 2-3 times, with a rest of at least 30 seconds in between. You'll often find that with each repetition, your muscles will feel a little more receptive to the stretch than the previous time.
- ✓ Consistency is extremely important. Choose a schedule for your stretching and stick to it. I recommend some form of stretching at the end of your workouts, plus one "lifestyle" stretch session each day. By "lifestyle stretch session," I mean either five minutes of stretching at your stairs just before bed, or a gentle

warm-up stretch first thing in the morning, or a five-minute stretch “breather” at the office during the day. It doesn't take long but a daily intervention such as this can seriously do wonders to your overall mobility.

- ✓ Generally, it's best to avoid stretching BEFORE your workout, as the point of stretching and the point of warming up are actually in conflict with each other; one helps the muscles recover and elongate, the other helps the muscles contract and ready themselves for the movement ahead. Timing is crucial.
- ✓ Finally, make sure your muscles are warm before you stretch.

With that out of the way, the following is a list of ten stretches you can do at home, at the gym, in bed or even at the office; unless stated otherwise, all stretches should be held for around 30 seconds, while breathing smoothly and focusing on relaxing and lengthening the target muscle:

**1. Stairway Calf Stretch #1: Stretched Knee**

Place your right foot on the lowest step, and your left foot on the next step up. Move your right heel so that it's hanging off the step, and drop it until you feel a deep stretch in the “belly” of your large (the one that's visible) calf muscle. Hold for at least 30 seconds, breathing smoothly, and concentrating on feeling the muscle relax and elongate. Repeat on the left side.

**2. Stairway Calf Stretch #2: Bent Knee**

This is identical to the first stretch described above, only once you drop your right heel, gently bend your right knee, sinking down as though “putting your weight” on your right heel (in quotes because your right heel is in the air). You may have to maneuver yourself forward and back a few times in order to feel the intended stretch, which will be closer to your Achilles tendon area (i.e. ankle region). Repeat on the left side.

**3. Stairway Hamstring Stretch**

Any of my clients will concur that this one is a killer! But it's amazingly effective in unlocking tight muscles behind the leg. It looks so innocent, too. Stand at the base of stairs, preferably where you have a railing to hold onto. Place your right foot on the step that allows you to straighten your leg completely, without having to round your back or “tuck” your pelvis forward. For most men, this will be the first or second step. For women, this is usually the third or fourth step. Place your right foot all the way forward, so that it's up against the next step and therefore forced into a flex. Make sure your left foot is pointing forward, and place both hands on the railings. Look up at the top of your stairs, and slide your hands UP. Do not look down or try to go forward or down towards your leg; keep your focus on going UP, and make sure your tailbone is pulling backward (i.e. to keep your back as straight as possible). You'll know when you're there, trust me! You'll feel it all the way up and down the back of the leg. Hold for at least 30-40 seconds, and don't forget to breathe; try first to relax your shoulders, then work on relaxing your leg. Repeat on the left. You may have to do this one twice before you feel your muscles loosen up.

**4. Chair Seat (or Desk) Forward Bend and Foot Flex**

This is a good one for the office as it's simple and discrete. Stand in front of a chair or desk with your feet a little more than hip distance apart, and toes pointing forward (make sure your feet don't point to the side at all). Bend forward and place your hands on the seat or on the desk. If you cannot fully straighten your knees in this position, either widen your stance (but don't let your toes point out to the side) or choose a higher place to rest your hands. Let some of your upper body's weight sink into your hands, and take a few breaths in which your weight shifts into the heels on your exhales (you'll feel the added hamstring stretch). After a few breaths, begin alternating raising the balls of your feet with each exhale: Exhale and raise your right ball of the foot, then lower and raise your left ball of the foot. Work up to 8-12 of these.

**5. Office Chair Seated Stretch, using towel, scarf or old tie**

While sitting in a chair, find another nearby chair and place your leg on it. Wrap a scarf, towel, or old tie around your foot. Straighten your knee fully, and cinch up the scarf until your hands are overlapping and

your hands are as close to your foot as you can bring them. Now, sit up straight, keep your knee straight, and try to relax your entire leg as you breathe. Repeat on the other side.

**6. Downward Facing Dog: Calf Stretch Focus**

From hands and knees, push up to Downward Facing Dog, and alternate pressing each heel down, attempting to elongate the calf muscle each time. It's often helpful to do this twice; come down from the pose, rest, and repeat a second time.

**7. Seated Hand-to-Foot Stretch**

Sit on the floor, grab a hold of your foot with both hands, and straighten your leg as much as you can. Don't worry if you can't stretch your leg very much at all; the objective here is to keep pulling the foot (without pain or discomfort) in a flexed position so as to stretch the calf muscles. Repeat on the other side.

**8. Morning (Bed) Knee-to-Chest/ Ankle Circle Stretch**

Before getting out of bed in the morning, lie on your back and gently pull one knee into the chest. Work slowly and smoothly, as the muscles and nerves are not yet fully awake and are often stiff and more vulnerable at this time. Hug the knee to your chest to begin opening up the leg and back, do a few squeezes of your upper body towards the leg (i.e. on your exhales), then lie back, relaxing your neck while you do ankle circles both clockwise and counterclockwise. Repeat on the other side.

**9. Morning Wall Forward Bend**

This is a safer one to do in the morning, as the hamstrings and back are not necessarily ready for bigger stretches. Stand in front of a wall, about 2-3 feet away, feet about hip distance apart. Place your hands on the wall, about shoulder distance apart, and at about chest height. Begin gently dropping your chest, with your hips centered on top of your heels (you may have to move forward or back to adjust for this), and sink your chest – and maybe hands – down until you feel the stretch in the back of your legs. Note: the more effective position is if your hands are higher than your chest; it allows your back to stay more neutral and provides more of a stretch to your chest as well. Gently push your tailbone back, your weight towards your heels, to maximize the stretch. Come out of the position carefully by walking your hands back up the wall, with your abdominal muscles pulled in to support your back.

**10. Evening (Bed) Towel Hamstring/Calf Stretch**

While lying in back, on your back, knees bent with feet on the bed, take a towel and wrap it around your right foot. Slowly stretch your right leg, using the towel to help you achieve the fullest stretch of your knee. Hold the stretch, concentrating on relaxing your neck (you can rest it on a pillow if need be), on dropping your tailbone, and keeping your foot flexed. Try to relax and elongate the entire back of your leg, from the heel to the tailbone. Repeat on the left side.

Remember, never stop moving!

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