

# 11 Shoulder Stretches To Give The Important Joint Some TLC

Whether you're a desk dweller or athlete, daily stretching can ward off pain and tightness.



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Even as someone who prioritizes daily activity, keeping my frame ache-free the past two years as a remote-working writer has been a serious challenge. One major pain point as a serial hunched-over typist: my shoulders. As a result? I'm trying to work effective shoulder stretches into my routine to undo the stiffness.

“Working with poor posture at a desk puts stress on the neck and shoulder joint,” explains Sabrina M. Strickland, MD, an orthopedic surgeon and sports medicine doctor at the Hospital for Special Surgery in New York City. “These types of [people] need to do core strengthening and stretching throughout the day.”

Okay, the strengthening part I've got covered. But stretching has never been my favorite activity (I attribute that disdain to boredom mainly). But as a desk worker in her early thirties, who wants to stay strong and active through the decades, I've come to accept that stretching can, and should, be part of my daily routine.

Of course, shoulder pain doesn't always stem from inactivity. Dr. Strickland notes that athletes — particularly those who throw or swing items, like baseballs or tennis rackets — are most prone to tightness and pain. And while she adds that cross-training (so opting for multiple exercise modalities and not just one thing), yoga, and regular strength training can help offset shoulder pains, incorporating shoulder stretches into your daily routine is key. “[Shoulder stretching] can help make up for deficits caused by injury, overuse, or poor mechanics,” Dr. Strickland says.

Is there a situation where you shouldn't be stretching your shoulder? "If you have a history of shoulder instability, you shouldn't be stretching your shoulders." What this means: If you've torn ligaments in your shoulder area, or have injured the socket in any way, you should probably steer clear of these stretches.

Holly Roser, CPT, adds that static stretching prior to exercising can actually lead to injury. Instead, if your shoulders are tight before a workout, aim to complete five to 10 minutes of dynamic stretching. "Arm circles, rolling your shoulders forward and backwards slowly, reaching your arms over your head slowly and squeezing your shoulder blades together, and bringing your hands together and apart are great examples of dynamic shoulder stretching," she says.

Here, Dr. Strickland and Roser offer up their favorite shoulder stretches to undo hours of sitting. You can walk through the entire series for a thorough upper-body stretch, or, pick a handful to do during your lunch break at work (or anytime!).

## 1. Wall Hand Walks



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**How to:** Stand roughly one foot away from a wall or sturdy object, facing forward. Step your right foot roughly one to two feet behind you, keeping the left foot planted. Place your left hand on the wall or object directly in front of you and begin to lean forward, keeping your back flat and core engaged. Begin to walk the hand up the wall or object slowly, pausing briefly at each replacement. Stop once your upper arm reaches your ear. Lean into the stretch for 10 seconds. Repeat on the other arm for two rounds total on each side.

## 2. Across-the-Chest Arm Stretch



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**How to:** Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart facing forward. Keeping your left arm straight, extend it directly across your chest. Use your right forearm arm to gently pull the left arm into your body. Hold the stretch for roughly 10 to 15 seconds, continuing to pull the left arm tighter into your body. Repeat on the other side for two rounds total on each side.

## 3. Behind-the-Head Towel Stretch



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**How to:** Grab a small towel or a stretching band. Stand with feet shoulder-width apart. With the towel or band in hand, reach up overhead, allowing the item to drape behind your head. With the other hand, reach for the bottom of the object. Use both hands to tug the item in either direction, keeping the core engaged throughout. Hold for roughly 10 to 15 seconds. Repeat on the other arm for two rounds total on each side.

## 4. Doorway Chest Opener



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**How to:** Stand roughly one foot next to a doorway or a sturdy pole (a squat rack works, too!), feet facing forward and shoulder-width apart. With your hand furthest away from the doorway nestled comfortably on your hip or extended outward for balance, bring your other hand to the crease of the doorway or around the pole with your arm at a 90-degree angle. Grabbing onto the object and holding firm, keep your feet facing forward as you \*gently\* twist your torso away from the item. Hold for 10 to 15 seconds, continuing to lean further away from the item. Repeat for the other arm for two rounds total on each side.

## 5. Lower-Back Push



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**How to:** Stand with your feet hip-width apart, arms by your sides. Place your right palm on the small of your back, slightly to the right. Press firmly into your back, opening up your shoulders in the process. Keep your core engaged throughout. Hold for roughly 10 to 15 seconds. Repeat on the other arm for two rounds total on each side.

## 6. Hands-Behind-Head Stretch



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**How to:** Stand with your feet hip-width apart with your palms behind your head, neck neutral, and eyes forward. Push your elbows behind you as much as possible, keeping your core engaged throughout. Hold for roughly 10 to 15 seconds. Repeat twice.

## 7. Child's Pose



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**How to:** Begin on your hands and knees. Push your knees slightly further than hip-width apart as you sit back. Extend your fingertips forward, keeping your fingers splayed. At the same time, continue to sink your hips backwards, attempting to keep your lower back as flat as possible. Hold for 15 to 20 seconds, continuing to let your hips sink further into the stretch. Repeat twice.

## 8. Thread the Needle



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**How to:** From child's pose, bring your left arm directly underneath you, reaching toward the right side of your body. Bring your left ear toward the ground (although it's perfectly fine if it doesn't touch!). Continue to push your hips downward throughout the motion. Hold for roughly 10 to 15 seconds. Repeat on the other arm for two rounds total on each side.

## 9. Dowel or Broom Stretch



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**How to:** Grab a dowel or broom. Standing with feet shoulder-width apart and facing forward, bring the item directly behind your head. Grasping firmly onto the item, with tension, attempt to pull your elbows as far back as is comfortable. Keep your gaze neutral and core engaged. Hold for roughly 15 to 20 seconds. Repeat twice.

## 10. Lying Overhead Stretch



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**How to:** Lie on the ground with your legs straight, feet relaxed. With your core engaged, bring your arms directly up overhead, keeping them straight. Attempt to keep your back as flat on the ground as possible. Your palms should be facing slightly inwards, reach back as far as you can, pause, then slowly return to starting position. Repeat 10 times.

## 11. Back Row Stretch



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**How to:** Stand with your feet hip-width apart, core engaged. Bring both arms to a 90-degree angle, palms facing inward. With control, imagine pinching your shoulders together as you draw either elbow behind you. Once you've reached a stopping point and cannot pull any further, pause for 15 to 20 seconds. Repeat twice.

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Julia Sullivan, CPT, is a New York City-based writer, indoor rowing instructor, outdoor enthusiast, newbie powerlifter, and devoted cat mother. Her work has been published in Women's Health, SELF, Health, Huffington Post, and more. She holds a B.A. in journalism and gender studies from Arizona State University and a personal training certificate from the American Council on Exercise. When she's not covering the latest health and wellness trends, you can find her hitting the hiking trails, working toward her deadlift goal of 400 pounds, and forcefully hugging her cat, Jeeves, against his will.

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