

# STRETCHING THE LOWER BODY

*By Personal Trainer, Sean Lunny, B.Ed.*

Do you ever wake up in the morning and as you start to lower your feet to the ground you feel pain in your lower back, stiffness across your shoulders and pain in your neck? What if you could do something to ease those painful sensations? It wouldn't cost you any money, it would take less than 15 minutes per day and you could do it in your own home. Would you do it?

The answer to a lot of these problems can be as simple as a basic stretching routine. Unfortunately, most people don't know how to stretch, so when they have tried to stretch in the past, it hasn't really helped. This usually results in finding other ways to alleviate the problem—ignore it, or get a softer mattress or a nicer couch, rather than dealing with the real cause of the pain which is often tight muscles.

Most animals seem to be hard wired to stretch. At my house, we have two cats and a lovebird. Both cats stretch all the time. In fact, cats are known for how much they stretch. I've read that a cat will stretch every thirty minutes. Have you ever noticed how flexible and how well even old cats can move about? It kind of makes you wonder if they are on to something. Of course, it could be the 16 hours of sleep they get each day! The bird came into my life through my wife. Up until that point, I had never really given "bird fitness" much thought. Now, I watch this little three inch, pastel-colored, miniature parrot running through his "yoga" exercises a few times per day. Leg out, wing out, stretch. Repeat other side. Obviously, animals instinctually know something we don't.

This week I want to give you five basic stretches to do to improve your lower body flexibility. The most important thing to realize when stretching is that your real goal is to get the muscles to "release". You can't force a muscle to stretch. In fact, if you apply too much pressure and your so called "stretch" becomes painful, you are probably only doing yourself harm and the muscle may tighten up. As you run through these exercises try to gently hold the stretch. You will know if you are actually doing the stretch correctly because, if you are, the "stretch" will actually go away and it will feel like you are not doing anything. This is when you will know you have gotten the muscle to release.

- 1) Lie down on the floor on your back. Both legs outstretched. Draw one knee towards your chest. Use your hand to help pull your knee towards your chest. Make sure your head stays on the ground and that your upper body is as relaxed as possible. You should feel a stretch through your hamstring and into your rear end. When you feel the muscle release, switch legs.
- 2) Starting in the same position as our first stretch. Take a belt or strap and wrap it around the middle of your foot. Keeping a slight bend in the knee use the strap to draw your leg up and toward you. Keep the upper body relaxed.

(2)



- 3) Turn over and lie face down. Reach back and grab onto your ankle. Pull the ankle towards your rear end. If it's hard to reach back, use the strap. To increase the stretch, push your hips into the floor.

3)



- 4) Lie on your back, two feet away from a wall. Place one foot on the wall and place your other foot over top resting your ankle on the knee. You should feel a stretch in the bent leg, reaching into your glutes.

4)



- 5) Stand up and leaning against a wall push one foot straight back pushing through the heel. Your other foot will be bent slightly. You should feel a stretch through your calf.

Try to make time to do these stretches every day. The easiest thing to do is to do it first thing in the morning, or in the evening when watching TV, or just before bed. The more often you stretch the better you will feel and the happier your body will feel and the faster you'll be able to get through the next MOMAR.