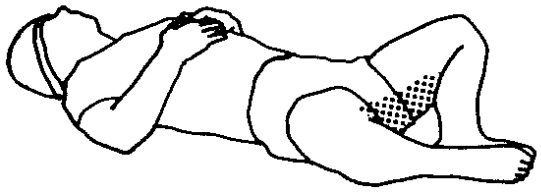
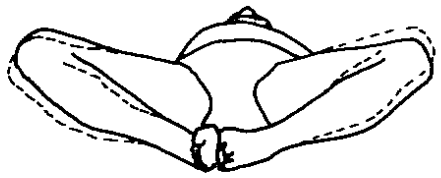
RELAXING STRETCHES FOR YOUR BACK

This is a short series of very easy stretches which you can do lying on your back. This series is beneficial because each position stretches a body area which is generally hard to relax. You can use this routine for mild stretching and relaxation.



Relax, with knees bent and soles of your feet together. This comfortable position will stretch your groin. Hold for 30 seconds. Let the pull of gravity do the stretching.



Variation: From this lying groin stretch, gently rock your legs as one unit (see illustration) back and forth about 10-12 times. These are real easy movements of no more than 1 inch in either direction. Initiate movements from top of hips. This will gently limber up your groin and hips.

A Stretch for the Lower Back, Side, and Top of Hip: The Secretary Stretch

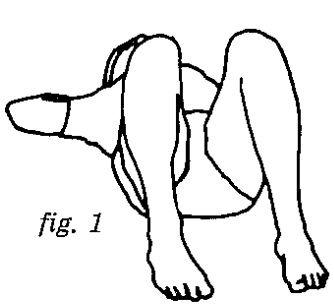


fig. 1

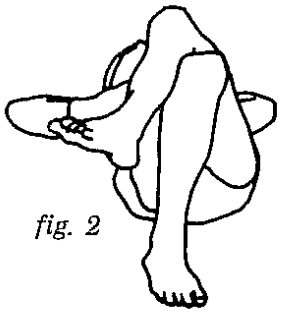


fig. 2

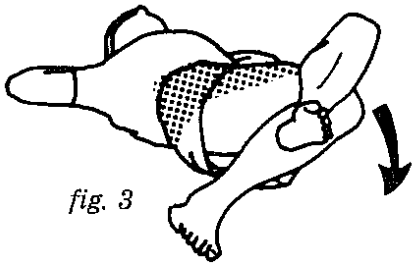
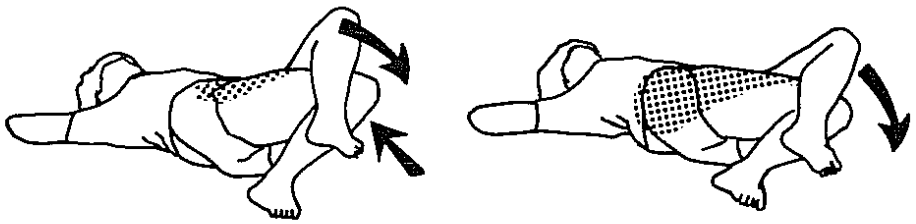


fig. 3

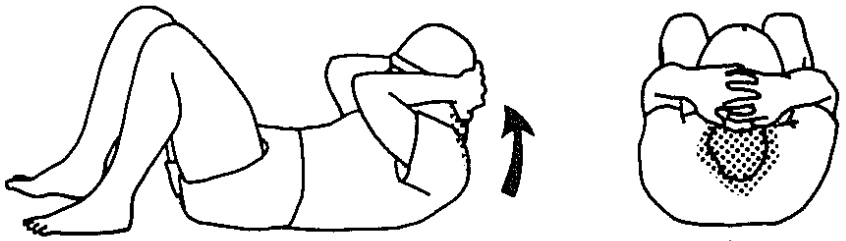
After gently stretching the groin, bring your knees together and rest your feet on the floor. Interlace your fingers behind your head and rest your arms on the floor (fig. 1). Now lift the left leg over the right leg (fig. 2). From here, use left leg to pull right leg toward floor (fig. 3) until you feel a good stretch along the side of the hip or in the lower back. Stretch and be relaxed. Keep the upper back, back of head, shoulders, and elbows flat on the floor. Hold for 30 seconds. *The idea is not to touch the floor with your right knee, but to stretch within* your *limits.* Repeat stretch for other side, crossing right over left leg and pulling down to the right.

This stretch position can be a real help if you have sciatic* problems of the lower back. If so, hold only stretch tensions that feel good. Never stretch to the point of pain.

Variation: Some people, especially women, will not feel a stretch. If that is the case with you, use opposite tension to create a stretch:



To do this, hold down the right leg with the left leg, as you try to pull the right leg back to an upright position (but, because you are holding the right leg down with the left leg, the right leg won't move). You will get a stretch on the side of the hip area. This technique is good for people who are tense as well as for those who are extremely limber in this area. A possible way to incorporate this variation in a series of stretches is to first do the regular secretary stretch (see p. 24), then use opposite tension, relax, and do the secretary stretch again.

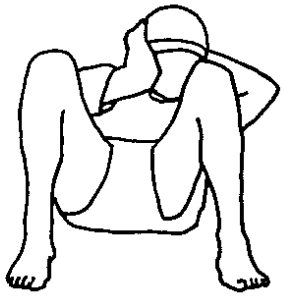


From the starting position of the last stretch for your back, you can stretch your upper spine and neck. This stretch helps reduce tension in the neck area and allows for freer movement of head and neck.

Interlace your fingers behind your head at about ear level. Now, use the power of your arms to slowly pull your head forward until you feel a slight stretch in the back of the neck. Hold for 5-10 seconds, then slowly return to the original starting position. Do this 3-4 times to gradually loosen up the upper spine and neck.

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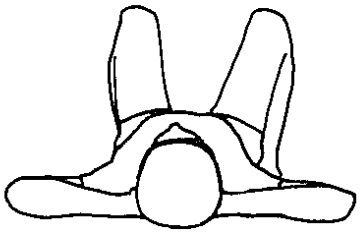
* The sciatic nerve is the longest and largest nerve of the body. It originates in the lumbar portion of the spine (lower back) and travels down the entire length of both legs and out to the great toe.

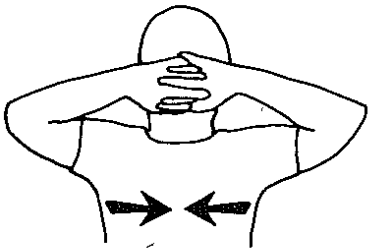


Variations: Gently pull your head and chin toward your left knee. Hold for 5 seconds. Relax and lower your head back down to the floor, then pull your head gently toward your right knee. Repeat 2-3 times.



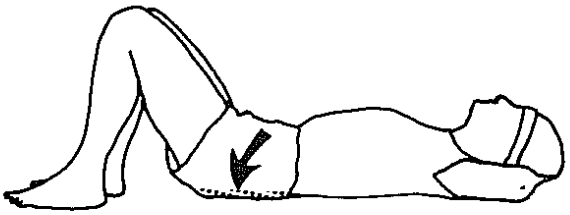
With the back of your head on the floor, turn your chin toward your shoulder (as you keep your head resting on the floor). Turn chin only as far as needed to get an easy stretch in the side of your neck. Hold 5 seconds, then stretch to the other side. Repeat 2-3 times.



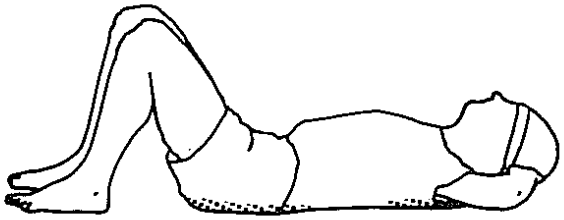


Shoulder Blade Pinch: From a bent-knee position, with your fingers interlaced behind your head, pull your shoulder blades together to create tension in the upper back area. (As you do this your chest should move upward.) Hold this controlled tension for 4-5 seconds., then relax and gently pull your head forward as shown on p. 25. This will help release tension and allow the neck to be stretched effectively.

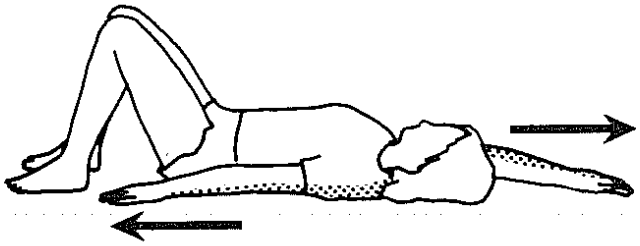
Think of creating tension, relaxing the same area, then stretching the back of the neck to help keep the muscles of the neck free to move without tightness. Repeat 3-4 times.



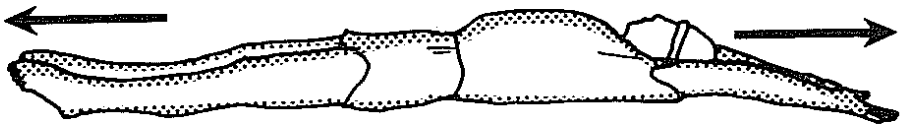
Lower Back Flattener: To relieve tension in lower back area, tighten your butt (*gluteus*) muscles and, at the same time, tighten your abdominal muscles to flatten your lower back. Hold this tension for 5-8 seconds, then relax. Repeat 2-3 times. Concentrate on maintaining constant muscle contraction. This pelvic tilting exercise will strengthen the butt and abdominal muscles so that you are able to sit and stand with good posture. Use these tension controls when sitting and standing.



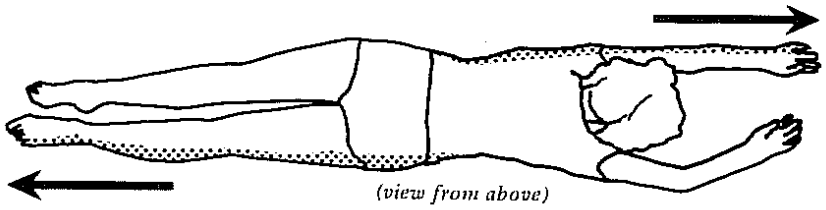
Shoulder Blade Pinch and Gluteus Tightener: Now, simultaneously do the shoulder blade pinch, flatten your lower back, and tighten your butt muscles. Hold 5 seconds, then relax and pull your head forward to stretch the back of your neck and upper back. Repeat 3-4 times. This feels real good.



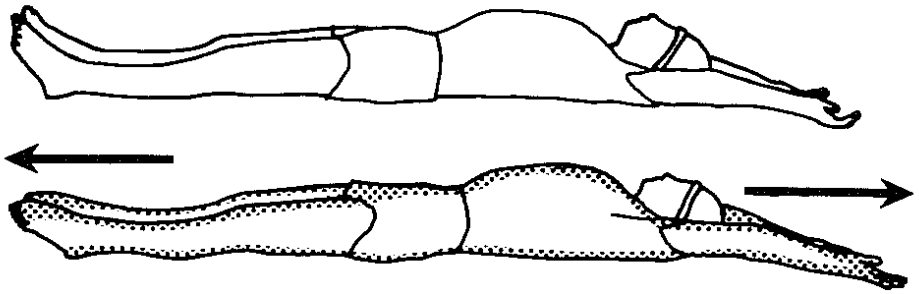
From a bent knee position, with your head resting on the floor, put one arm above your head (palm up) and the other arm down along your side (palm down). Now reach in opposite directions at the same time to create a controlled stretch in your shoulders and back. Hold stretch for 6-8 seconds. Do both sides at least twice. Keep your lower back relaxed and flat.



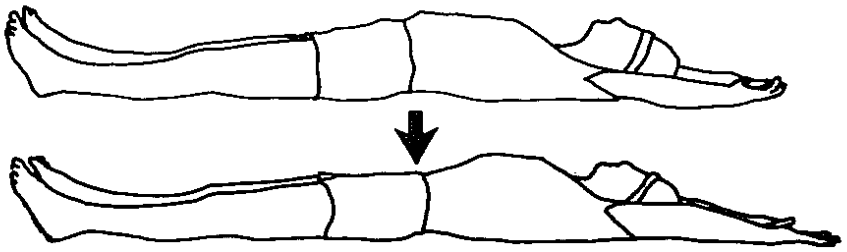
Elongation Stretch: Extend your arms overhead and straighten out your legs. Now reach as far as is comfortable in opposite direction with your arms and legs. Stretch for 5 seconds, and then relax.



Now stretch diagonally. Point the toes of your left foot as you extend your right arm. Stretch as far as is comfortable. Hold 5 seconds, then relax. Stretch the right leg and the left arm the same way. Hold each stretch for at least 5 seconds, then relax.

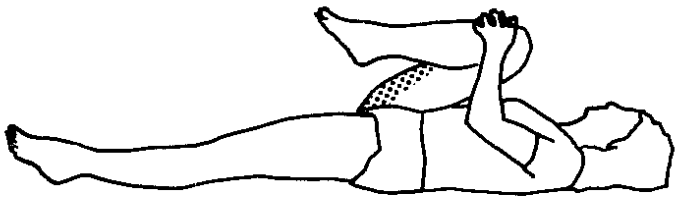


Now, at the same time, stretch both arms and both legs again. Hold 5 seconds, then relax. A good stretch for the muscles of the rib cage, abdominals, spine, shoulders, arms, ankles, and feet.

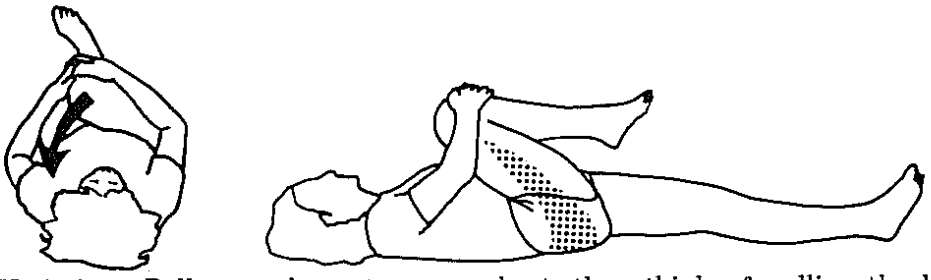


As a variation of this stretch, pull in with the abdominal muscles as you stretch. This will make you feel thin. Excellent exercise for your internal organs.

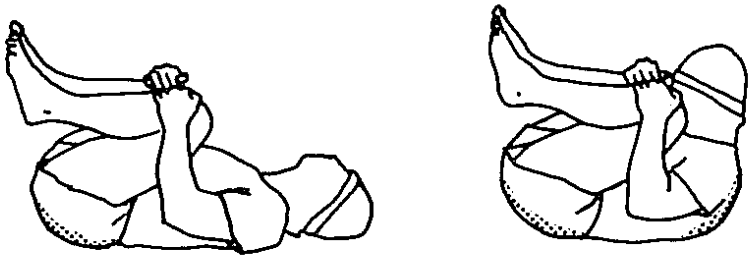
You may do these stretches as many times as you want. Usually three times is sufficient for reducing tension and tightness. These should help relax your spine and entire body. They help reduce overall body tension quickly. You could do these just before sleeping.



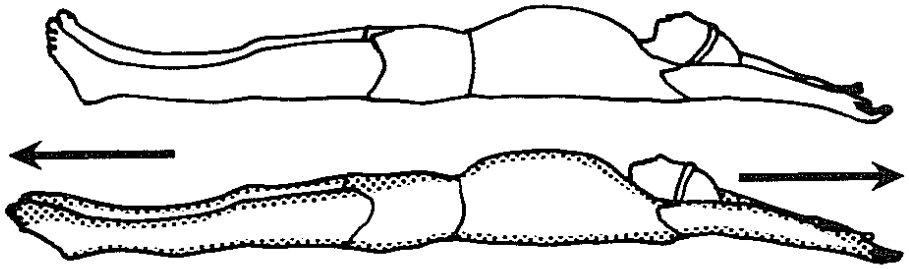
Pull your right leg toward your chest. For this stretch keep the back of your head on the floor or mat if possible, but don't strain. Hold an easy stretch for 30 seconds. Repeat, pulling your right leg toward your chest. Be sure to keep your lower back flat. If no real stretch is felt, don't worry. If the position feels good, use it. This is a very good position for the legs, feet, and back.



Variation: Pull your knee to your chest, then think of pulling the knee across your body toward your opposite shoulder to create a stretch on the outside of your right hip. Hold an easy stretch for 20 seconds. Do both sides.

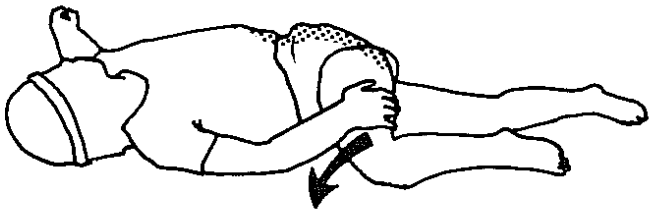


After pulling one leg at a time to your chest, pull both legs to your chest. This time concentrate on keeping the back of your head down and then curling your head up toward your knees.

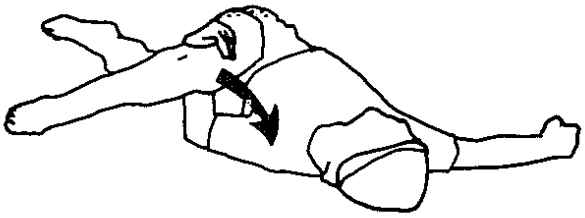


Again, straighten out both legs. Stretch and then relax.

A Stretch for the Lower Back and Side of Hip



Bend one knee at 90° and, with your opposite hand, pull that bent leg up and over your other leg as shown above. Turn your head to look toward the hand of the arm that is straight (head should be resting on floor, not held up). Now, using the hand on your thigh (resting just above knee) pull your bent leg down toward the floor until you get the right stretch feeling in your lower back and side of hip. Keep feet and ankles relaxed. Make sure the back of your shoulders are flat on the floor. If not, the angle changes between the shoulders and the hips and it is more difficult to create a proper stretch. Hold an easy stretch for 30 seconds, each side.

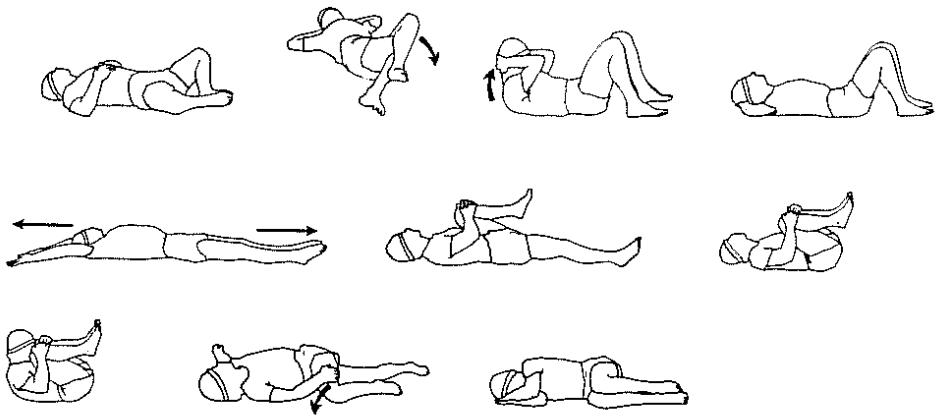


To increase the stretch in your buttocks, reach under your leg and behind your knee. Slowly pull knee toward opposite shoulder until you get the right stretch. Keep both shoulders flat on floor. Hold for 15-25 seconds.



You can end a series of stretches for your back by lying in the "fetus position." Lie on your side with your legs curled up and your head resting on your hands. Relax.

SUMMARY



Learn to listen to your body. If the tension builds or you feel pain, your body is trying to let you know that something is wrong, that there is a problem. If this happens, ease off slightly until the stretch *feels* right.