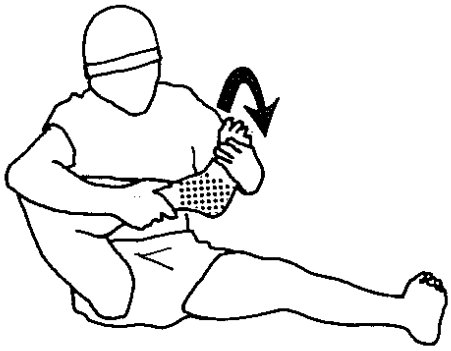
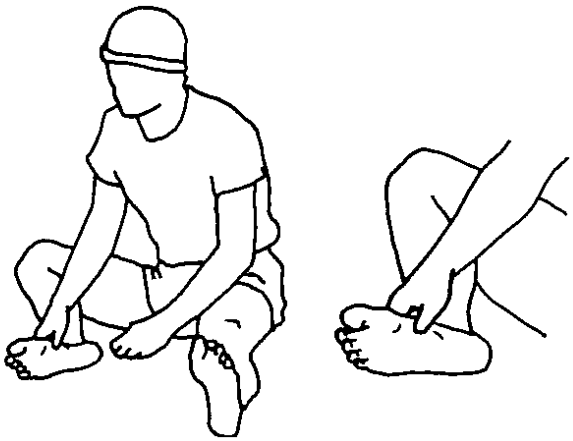
STRETCHES FOR THE LEGS, FEET, AND ANKLES



Rotate your ankle clockwise and counter-clockwise through a complete range of motion with slight resistance provided by your hand. Rotary motion of the ankle helps to gently stretch out tight ligaments. Repeat 10-20 times in each direction. Do this to both ankles and feel if there is any difference between ankles in terms of tightness and range of motion. Sometimes an ankle that has been sprained will feel a bit weaker and tighter. This difference may go unnoticed until you work each ankle separately and compare.

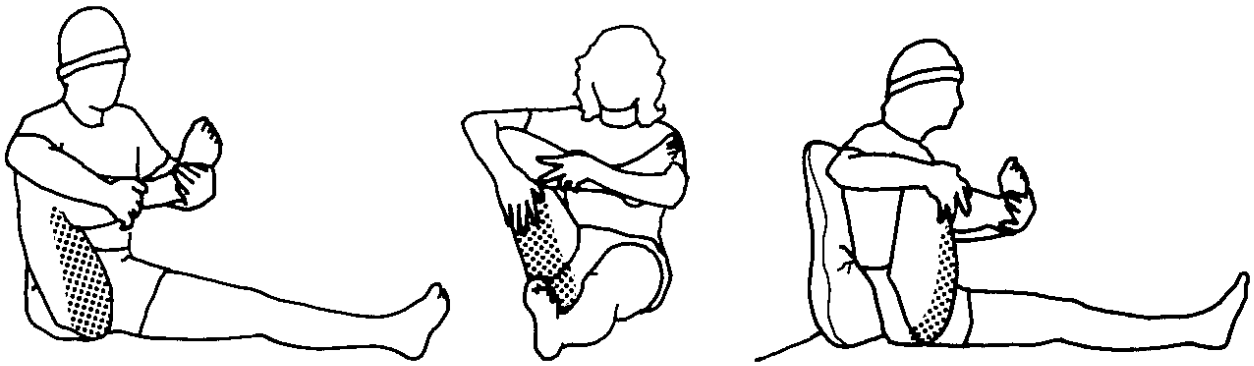


Next, use your fingers to gently pull the toes toward you to stretch the top of the foot and tendons of the toes. Hold an easy stretch for 10 seconds. Repeat 2-3 times.



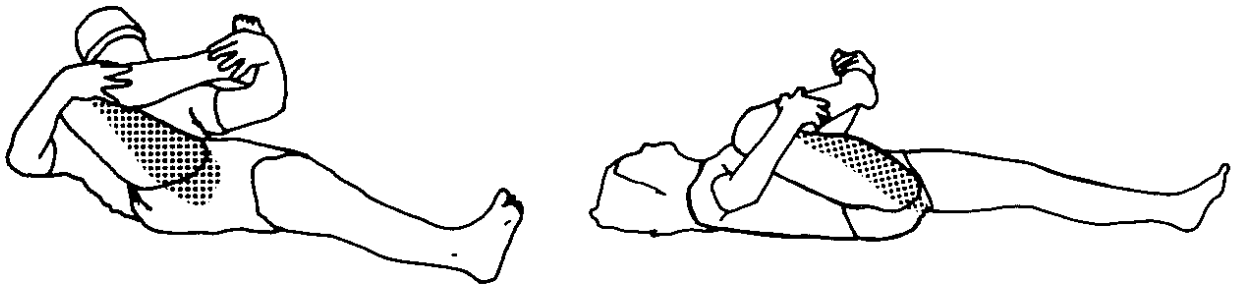
With your thumbs, massage up and down the longitudinal arch of your foot. Use circular motions with a good amount of pressure to loosen tissues. Do both feet. Can you feel any tenseness or tightness? Always massage each arch

2-3 minutes before bedtime. It will relax your feet. This is good to do spontaneously while watching TV, or just before going to sleep. Massage with a pressure that feels good.



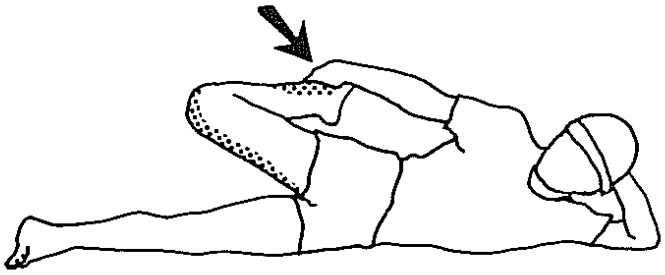
To stretch the upper hamstrings and hip, hold onto the outside of your ankle with one hand, with your other hand and forearm around your bent knee. Gently pull the leg *as one unit* toward your chest until you feel an easy stretch in the back of the upper leg. You may want to do this stretch while you rest your back against something for support. Hold 20 seconds. Make sure the leg is pulled as one unit so no stress is felt in the knee. After this, slightly increase the stretch by pulling the leg a little closer to your chest. Hold this developmental stretch for 20 seconds. Do both sides. Is one leg more flexible than the other?

For some of you, this position will not provide a stretch. If that is the case, do the stretch shown below.

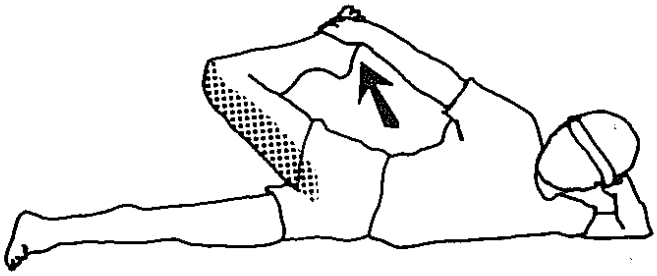


Begin this stretch lying down, then lean forward to hold on to your leg as described in the previous stretch. Gently pull leg as one unit toward your chest until you feel an easy stretch in the butt and upper hamstring. Hold for 20 seconds. Doing this stretch in a lying position will increase the stretch in the hamstrings for people who are relatively flexible in this area. Do both legs and compare.

Experiment: see the difference in the stretch when your head is forward and when the back of your head is on the floor. Always keep every stretch within a personal comfort range.

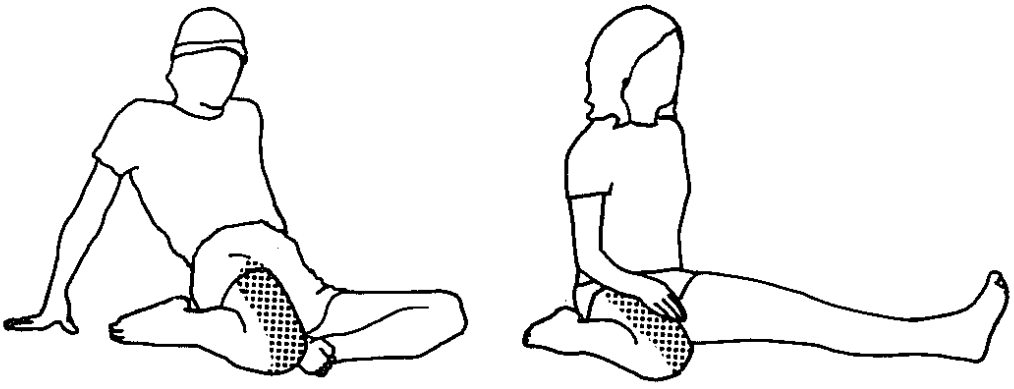


Lie on your left side and rest the side of your head in the palm of your left hand. Hold the top of your right foot with your right hand between the toes and ankle joint. Gently pull the right heel toward the right buttock to stretch the ankle and quadriceps (front of thigh). Hold an easy stretch for 10 seconds. *Never stretch the knee to the point of pain. Always be in control.*

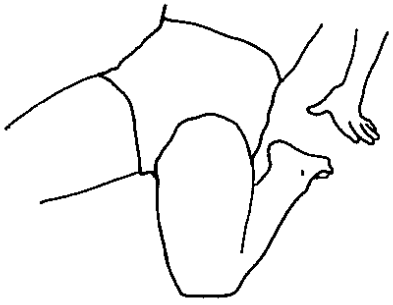


Now move the front of your right hip forward by contracting the right butt (*gluteus*) muscles as you push your right foot into your right hand. This should stretch the front of your thigh. Hold an easy stretch for 10 seconds. Keep the body in a straight line. Now stretch the left leg in the same way. You may get a good stretch in the front of the shoulder. At first it may be hard to hold this for very long. Just work on the proper way to stretch without worrying about flexibility or how you look. Regularity with stretching will create a positive change.

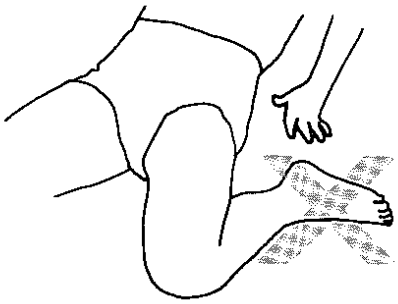
If you experience any knee problems with these stretches, don't do them. Instead, use the opposite-hand-to-opposite-foot technique of stretching the knee (p. 74).



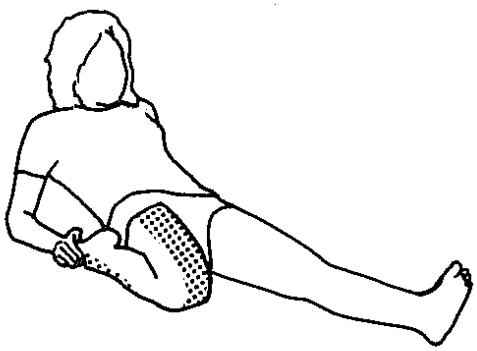
A Sitting Stretch for the Quadriceps: First sit with your right leg bent, with your right heel just to the outside of your right hip. The left leg is bent and the sole of your left foot is next to the inside of your upper right leg. (You could also do this stretch with your left leg straight out in front of you.)



In this stretch position your foot should be extended back with the ankle flexed. If your ankle is tight and restricts the stretch, move your foot just enough to the side to lessen the tension in your ankle.



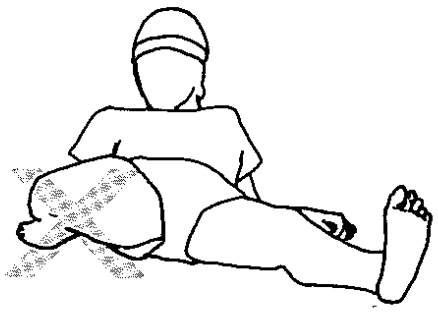
Try not to let your foot flare out to the side in this position. By keeping your foot pointed straight back you take the stress off the inside of your knee. The more your foot flares to the side, the more stress there is on your knee.



Now, slowly lean *straight back* until you feel an easy stretch. Use your hands for balance and support. Hold this easy stretch for 30 seconds.

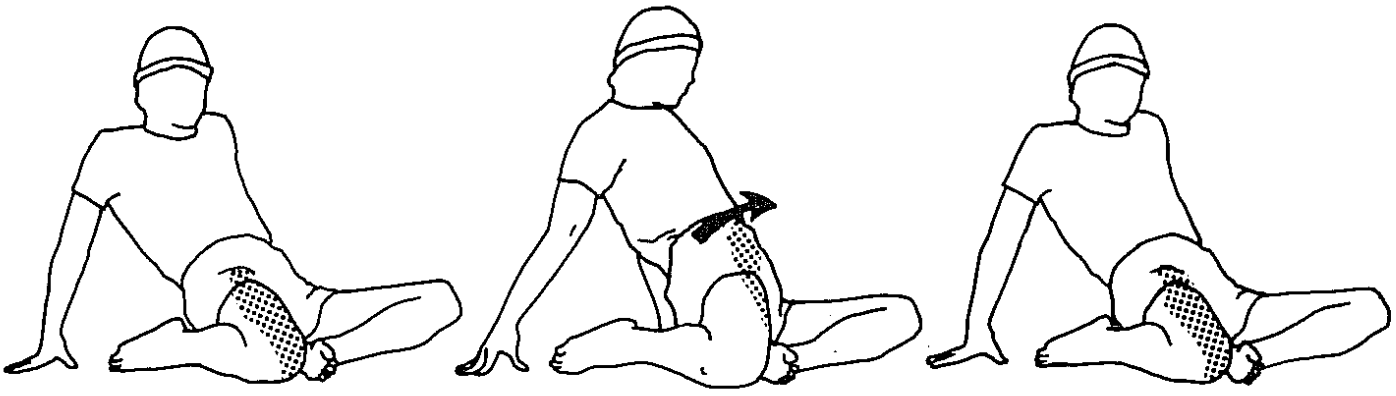
Some people will have to lean back a lot further than others to find the right stretch tension. And some people may feel the right stretch without leaning back at all. Just be aware of how you feel and forget about how far you can go. Get into what *you* can do and don't worry about anyone else.

Do not let your knee lift off the floor or mat. If your knee comes up you are overstretching by leaning back too far. Ease up on the stretch.



Now slowly, and with complete control, increase into the developmental stretch. Hold for 25 seconds, then slowly come out of it. Switch sides and stretch the left thigh the same way.

Can you feel any difference in tension in the two stretches? Is one side more limber than the other? Are you more flexible on one side?

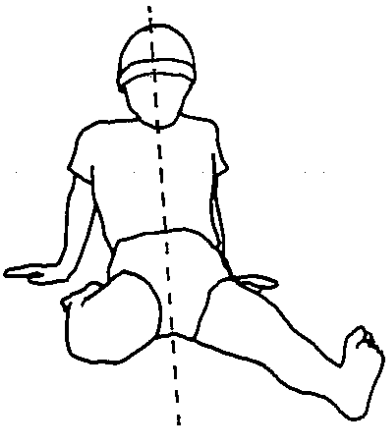


After stretching your quads, practice tightening the buttocks on the side of the bent leg as you turn the hip over. This will help stretch the front of your hip and give a better overall stretch to upper thigh area. After contracting the butt muscles for 5-8 seconds, let the buttocks relax. Drop your hip down and continue to stretch the quad for another 15 seconds. Practice to eventually get both sides of the buttocks to touch the floor at the same time during the quad stretch. Now do other side.

Note: Stretching the quad first, then turning the hip over as the buttocks contract will help change the stretch feeling when you return to the original quad stretch.



If, during the stretch, there is any pain in the knee joint, move the knee of the leg being stretched closer to the midline of your body and see if you can find a more comfortable position.



Moving your knee closer to the midline of your body may take the stress off of the knee, but *if there is pain which does not subside in any variation of this position, discontinue doing this particular stretch.*

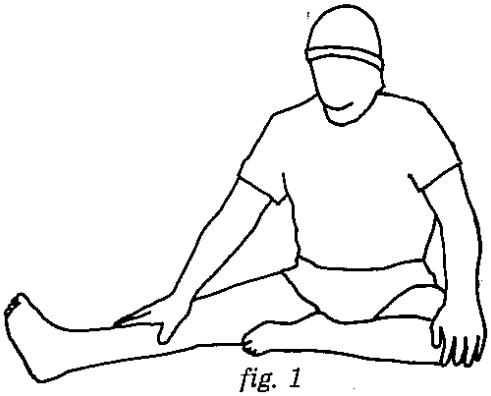


fig. 1

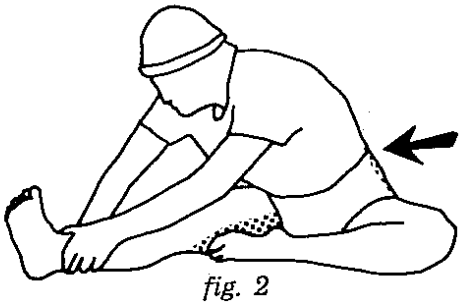


fig. 2

To stretch the hamstrings of the same leg that was bent (see previous page), straighten the right leg with the sole of your left foot slightly touching the inside of the right thigh. You are now in the straight-leg, bent-knee position (fig. 1). Slowly bend forward from the hips toward the foot of the straight leg (fig. 2) until you create the slightest feeling of stretch. Hold this for 20 seconds. After the stretch feeling has diminished, bend a bit more forward from the hips. Hold this developmental stretch for 25 seconds. Then switch sides and stretch the left leg in the same manner.

During this stretch, keep the foot of the straight leg upright with the ankle and toes relaxed. Be sure the quadriceps are soft to the touch (relaxed) during the stretch. Do not dip your head forward when initiating the stretch (see pp. 16-17, *Getting Started*).

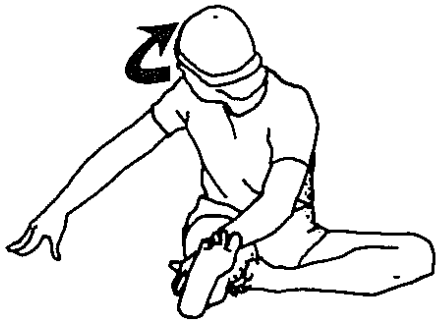
I have found that it is best to first stretch your quads, then the hamstrings of the same leg. It is easier to stretch the hamstrings after the quadriceps have been stretched.



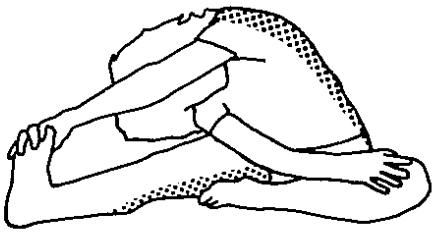
Use a towel to help you stretch if you cannot *easily* reach your feet.

Get used to doing variations of basic stretches. In each variation you will use your body in a different way. You will become more aware of all the stretch possibilities when you change the angles of the stretch tension, even if the angle changes are very slight.

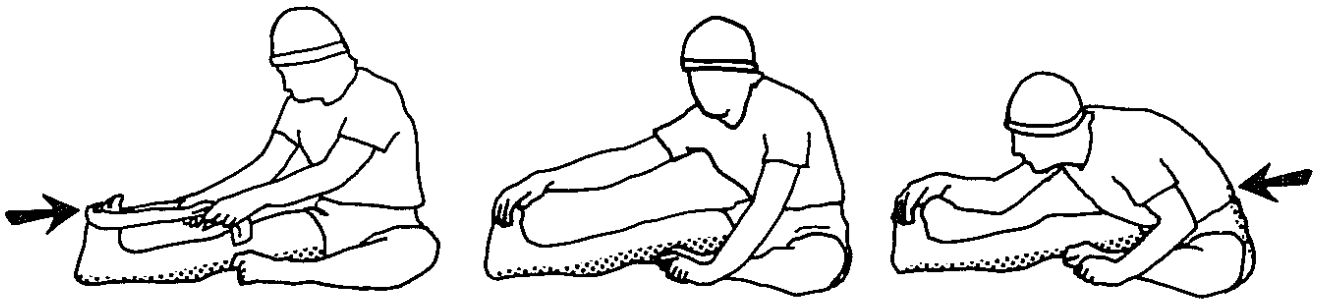
Variations of the Straight-leg, Bent-knee Position:



Reach across your body with your left arm to the outside of your right leg. Place your right hand out to the side for balance. This will stretch the muscles of the upper back and spine and the side of the lower back, as well as the hamstrings. To change the stretch, look over your right shoulder as you slightly turn the front of your left hip to the inside. This will stretch the lower back and in between the shoulder blades.



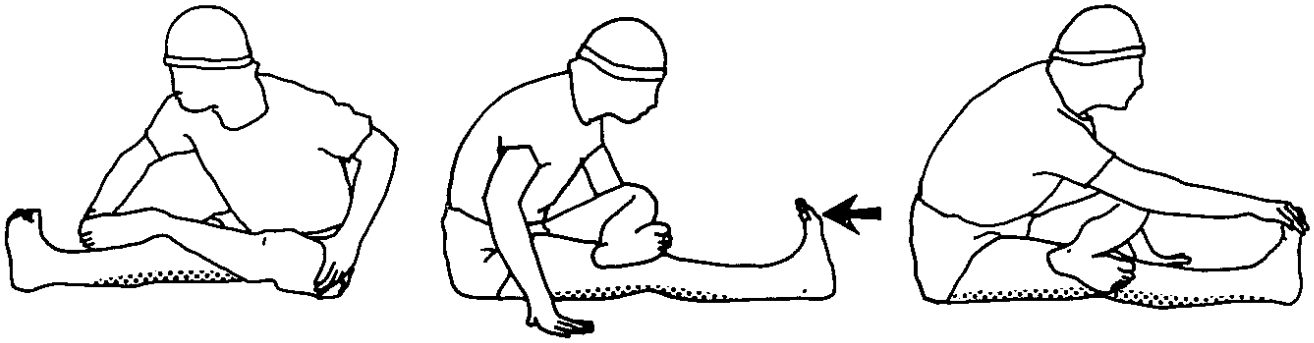
If you are especially flexible, you can increase the stretch along your sides with a variation of this position: with your right leg straight, reach over your head with your left arm and grab the outside of your right foot. As you bend, rest your right hand on your left knee. This is an excellent stretch for the hamstrings and the lateral portion of the upper body. It helps keep the waistline trim.



To stretch the back of the lower leg (calf and soleus muscles), either use a towel around the ball of your foot to pull your toes toward your knee, or if you are more flexible, use your hand to pull your toes toward your knee. Find an easy stretch and hold for 25 seconds. You may need to lean forward at the waist (from the hips) to increase the stretch.



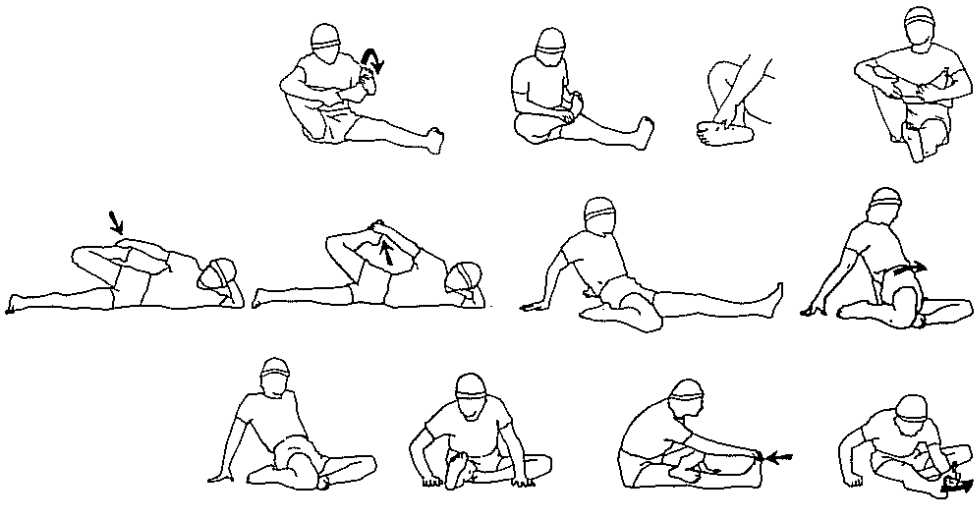
To stretch the outside of your lower leg, reach down with your opposite hand and hold on to the outside border of your foot (see drawing). Now, gently turn the outside of the foot to the inside to feel a stretch in the outside of the lower leg. This stretch should be done with a straight leg, but the leg should be bent if you are unable to *easily* hold on to the outside border of your foot with your leg straight. In this straight-leg position the quadriceps should be soft, relaxed. Hold an easy stretch for 25 seconds.



To isolate a stretch in the back of the knee, start with one leg straight. Then bend the other knee, and set the bent leg on top of the straight leg with the ankle of the bent leg resting just to the outside of the other leg and just above (*not on*) the knee. Now gently bend forward from your hips until an easy tension is felt behind your knee. Hold the easy stretch for 20 seconds and the developmental stretch for 15 seconds. This is very good for people who are tight behind the knee. But always be aware of overstretching.

Never lock your knees when doing sitting stretches. Be sure to keep the front of your thigh (quadriceps) relaxed in all positions using a straight leg. It is impossible to stretch the hamstrings correctly when the opposing set of muscles, the quadriceps, are not relaxed.

SUMMARY



Bouncing movements while stretching can actually make you tighter rather than more flexible. For example, if you bounce four or five times while touching your toes (which most of us did in high school), then several minutes later bend over again, you will probably find that you are farther away from your toes than when you started! Each bouncing movement activates the stretch reflex, tightening the very muscles you are trying to stretch.