



Can you
**PASS THE
FLEXIBILITY**
test?

If you're struggling to pull your socks on in the morning, it might be a good idea to work on your flexibility. Here's our guide on how to loosen up

You might think true flexibility means being able to do the splits, curl into a backbend, or sit with your knees pretzelled into a lotus position, but these are merely party tricks for the hypermobile. What we really need is the sort of functional flexibility that allows us to clip and unclip a bra strap, glance over each shoulder with fluidity, and to touch our toes without gasping or saying 'ooooof'. And it's this basic range of motion that we are at risk of losing as we age, thanks to our increasingly sedentary lifestyles. In fact, a 2021 study found that people who

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sat for more than four hours a day had hip joints that were substantially less flexible than those who were more active. Over time, this could be enough to make the most sedentary people unsteady on their feet – and more at risk of falling.

Stay flexible, however, and you'll ensure blood supply to the joints, keeping them healthy, and stopping inactive muscles shortening. You'll also be maintaining alignment and balance, decreasing the risk of injury. Having a good range of motion means we can tackle the lifting, stretching and bending that our everyday life requires. And some small studies even suggest that flexibility is linked to improved sleep, less pain and a lower risk of depression.

USE IT OR LOSE IT

'A large part of flexibility is genetic,' says Dawn Skelton, professor of ageing and health at Glasgow Caledonian University. But, she adds, whether we were born flexible or not, muscles become shorter, connective tissue (fascia) becomes more fibrous, and we gradually lose the range of movement in our joints as we age. Dawn is adamant that we all can – and should – improve our flexibility. 'It really is a case of use it or lose it,' she says. 'Flexibility is one of the least studied components of fitness, but it is something we should all be working on daily; regularity is key.'

So how can we stop ourselves stiffening up? Physiotherapist Sammy Margo (sammytherapist.com) says there's research to show that men and women in their 90s who prioritise staying active can defy their age and maintain the same range of movement as people decades younger.

The good news, she adds, is that it's not hard to loosen up, as movement of any kind helps. 'For instance, our knees are not designed to be bent at 90 degrees for hours on end as they are if you sit all day,' she says. 'You can ease stiffness by simply straightening your legs periodically under your table or desk, sliding your heels forwards and back along the floor.'

'Take every opportunity to stand, so that the knees can straighten, and when you do stand, push your bottom forwards to give a much-needed stretch to the hip flexors at the top front of the thighs, which can become very short and tight after sitting for a long time.'

'Stretching is something we should be doing daily; regularity is key'

Getting up and moving around regularly helps, and when you do wander into the kitchen to make a cup of tea, Sammy suggests walking like the king. 'Interlink your fingers from each hand behind your back to open up your chest and get your shoulders back and down, which helps to reverse the slumping posture many people have when sitting.'

Dawn says the best time to stretch is at the end of an exercise session and recommends the simple flexibility exercises on nhs.uk. 'Yoga and pilates are fabulous, and swimming is great – as long as you do front crawl or back stroke, which require you to use your shoulders and twist your torso.' Remember, you're not aiming for excellence and it doesn't matter how good or bad you are. The key is to improve.

MENOPAUSE MATTERS

As a pilates teacher who now specialises in helping peri- and post-menopausal women, Dinah Siman (menopausepilates.com) believes hormone levels can play a contributing role in diminishing flexibility at midlife and beyond.

'The rapidly fluctuating hormone levels at menopause can lead to muscles and joints losing the anti-inflammatory and lubricating effect of oestrogen and testosterone, triggering discomfort, stiffness and pain,'

she says. 'New research shows that hormone replacement (HRT) can help ease problems with spinal discs, and it can also make frozen shoulder less likely.' She suggests speaking to your GP about HRT if you are moving through the menopause and have suddenly started to experience joint, muscle or ligament pain, and finding local pilates classes to improve flexibility and strength.

'Most of us get stuck in a movement rut where we only really move forwards and backwards,' she says, 'but pilates will encourage rotation, which will help you maintain that flexibility.' Dinah demonstrates targeted movement 'snacks' on Instagram (@menopausepilates), and suggests regular rotation movements if you tend to sit for hours on end. 'Just twist your upper body around, turning your rib cage to face the back of the chair,' she suggests, 'then twist in the other direction.'

She singles out the classic thigh stretch as being the stretch that's most likely to

PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY IMAGES



ARE YOU WAY TOO tight?

Try these tests to measure your flexibility. March on the spot for two minutes as a warm-up, and test in the evening when you are likely to be more bendy.

TEST #1

THE 'BACK SCRATCH'

Place one hand behind your head and back over the shoulder and reach as far as possible down the middle of your back, your palm touching your body and the fingers directed downwards. Place the other arm behind your back, palm facing outwards and fingers upward, and reach up as far as possible, attempting to touch the middle fingers of both hands. Switch sides and practise daily, using a rolled-up towel gripped in both hands to gently pull your hands closer together.

TEST #2

THE TOE TOUCH

Take your shoes off and stand on a flat surface. Exhale and bend forwards, reaching down towards the floor with your hands, letting your head drop between your arms. Keep your knees straight, and toes pointed forwards. Hold the position for three seconds, slowly returning to stand. With daily practise you will be able to gradually get your hands closer to the floor.

TEST #3

THE NECK TWIST

Sit with your shoulders facing forwards and then slowly turn your head from one side and then to the other. You should aim to turn your head 90 degrees from your starting position, getting your chin almost in line with your shoulder.

make a difference to stiffness in your hips. 'Simply stand tall, then bend one leg, grabbing your foot behind you, pull your knees together and push that foot against your hand to feel a strong stretch down the front of your thigh.'

Experts also believe that for an optimal range of movement as we age, it's best to build in a mix of resistance training and aerobic activity involving whole body movement – swimming, walking, running – as well as stretching; these can all help offset any age-related decline in flexibility.

'The message is that the older we get, the more attention we should pay to maintaining our flexibility,' says Dr Lewis Macgregor, a lecturer in physiology and nutrition in sport at the University of Stirling. Stretching is part of the equation, he adds, but maintaining muscle strength and aerobic fitness are just as important. The aim is not to be supremely supple, just flexible enough to move freely.

FOCUS ON FOOD

If you're concerned about stiff joints, it's worth taking a look at your diet. Researchers at the University of Gothenburg studied the anti-inflammatory impact of a diet rich in oily fish, whole grains, fruits, nuts, berries and vegetables compared to a typical Western diet high in refined grains, red meat and chicken, and low in fruit and veg. They found that participants who stuck to their eating plan had significantly lower scores in tests of body-wide inflammation.

'Plenty of plants will also ensure good levels of vitamin C, which can help the body produce collagen – a foundation for the building and repair of muscles, tendons and ligaments,' says nutritionist Rob Hobson (robhobson.co.uk). 'Plus, the omega-3 fatty acids found in oil-rich fish such as mackerel, salmon and sardines will help provide your joints with proper lubrication. If you're not a fish lover, supplements may help.'

Studies have shown that high strength omega-3 supplements may help to protect against loss of cartilage if you have osteoarthritis, and might help to relieve painful joints and morning stiffness.

(Try Healthspan Super Strength Omega 3, £14.95 for 120 capsules; healthspan.co.uk).

An easy fix, maybe, but one that experts suggest might be worth adding to our flexibility arsenal. And who knows – with good nutrition, stretching and regular movement, perhaps doing the splits isn't as far out of reach as we thought. ■