THE PAIN-FREE FIX
31 Soothing Stretches + Exercises to Fix Your Muscle Pain
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Neck and shoulder pain — now that’s a sure way to put a kink in your day.

While knots in any muscle group are frustrating, isolated tension in the shoulders and neck is particularly uncomfortable. Find relief today with these nine exercises to relieve neck and shoulder pain.

The Source of Neck and Shoulder Pain

It’s important to understand that feeling discomfort in the neck or shoulder doesn’t necessarily mean that the source of pain itself stems from that same region. Neck pain could be caused by a shoulder impingement, and pain in the shoulder could be stemming from the neck. In fact, tension in either area could be sparked by an injury or alignment issue in the back of the pelvis, or even from as low down as the ankles.

This is because the entire back side of the body is connected via a thin webbing of connective tissue (fascia), known as the superficial back line. Running from your forehead — up and over the crown of the head, down the length of the spine and the back of the legs — to the bottom of your feet, this fascial line is responsible for extending the body and keeping you in an upright position.

Yet because this fascia is all connected, a dysfunction anywhere in the body along this line could lead to pain in another area. For example, incorrect pelvic positioning can lead to misalignment in the low back, which can continue up the thoracic spine, affecting the position and stability of the shoulder, and ultimately causing neck pain (1).

The exercises that I am showing you today will improve your neck and shoulder mobility and stability, which should greatly ease pain connected with these regions. However, if your pain persists, or you’re experiencing sharp-shooting pain in the neck, shoulder or arms, we recommend that you consult with a physical therapist or kinesiologist, who can take a look at your body as a whole.
Common Lifestyle Causes of Neck and Shoulder Pain

Now let’s assume that your current neck and shoulder pain IS actually caused from restriction or instability in the neck and shoulders themselves. Here are three lifestyle factors that could be contributing to your discomfort:

**Tech-Neck (Forward Head Posture)**
If you’re anything like the average American you could be spending up to eleven hours each day staring at a screen! (2)

Without ergonomics awareness, staring at a computer, smartphone or television screen for hours each day is leading to forward head posture. This causes the neck extensors to stretch, the neck flexors to weaken, and can load an additional 60 pounds of pressure to the back of the neck. Pain aside, forward head posture can also inhibit breathing capacity, lead to migraines and cause brain fog.

**Solution:** Keep your neck in neutral alignment throughout the day (3), and take a tech-timeout as often as you can.

**Reaching Forward ( Rounded Shoulder Posture)**
In addition to pulling your neck forward, our chronic use of computers and phones — as well as other lifestyle habits such as driving, cooking, and spin classes — is causing rounded shoulder posture. By living life with your arms primarily in front of you, the chest gets overly tight and the mid and upper back weaken; this instability is a common cause of neck and shoulder pain.

**Solution:** Skip the chest press for a while and focus on exercises that strengthen the trapezius, rhomboids and latissimus dorsi muscle groups on the back side of the body.

**Feeling Stressed**
Stress not only causes mental tension, but physical tension as well; as your sympathetic nervous system fires up (getting you ready to fight-or-take-flight), so does your body. The problem is that this physical response likely occurs when you’re sitting at your desk or in your car, so instead of being able to release the energy from your tightly coiled muscles, the pressure in your body remains, which can lead to neck and shoulder pain.

**Solution:** Reduce stress by practicing deep breathing exercises throughout the day.

Looking for more stretches to reduce pain? Try these:

- Hip stretches: [13 Feel-Good Hip Openers](#)
- Lower back pain: [13 Stretches for Lower Back Pain](#)
- Sciatica: Sciatica: [What It Is, Common Causes, and How to Fix It](#)
This sequence is designed to be completed from start to finish; I’ve arranged it into four sections for maximum relief:

**Upper back mobility:** A flexible upper back places less stress on your neck and shoulders.

**Neck mobility:** In order to reposition your neck to its optimal neutral alignment, we must first move it gently through a full range of motion.

**Shoulder rotations:** These exercises are designed to open the chest and shoulder and reverse forward shoulder posture while gently strengthening the muscles that support the mid back.

**Alignment:** The sequence finishes with two alignment exercises to help you return to an optimal neck and shoulder position

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**Open Book**

Start by lying on your side with your knees bent in front of your hips and hands over your ears, elbows pointing forward. Inhale and reach the top elbow to the ceiling, looking up at the elbow point. Exhale and continue to open the top elbow to the back side until it touches the floor or an elevated prop such as a pillow (to decrease range of motion). Stay for a full inhale and exhale, relaxing your shoulders, inhale again, then exhale and return to the starting position.

**Tip:** Keep your knees stacked and resting on the floor; move slowly and imagine that you are unwinding the top half of your spine.
Start seated on the floor with your mid back resting on a foam roller or a rolled-up bath towel. Support the head in the hands, elbows wide, and keep the feet on the floor. Inhale to prepare. Exhale and slowly extend your spine back over the roller, only moving as far as you need to until you feel a gentle stretch in the upper back, chest and abdominals. Inhale to hold. Exhale and return to the starting position, using your abdominals.

**Tip:** Start with a small range of motion and gently increase this over time; you should feel no discomfort in your low back during this exercise.
Start in a comfortable seated or kneeling position, with the head stacked directly above the shoulders and the arms resting by the sides. Inhale to prepare. Exhale and slowly and gently lower the left ear towards the left shoulder, only so far as you need to feel the beginning of the stretch. Inhale to hold. Exhale and return to the top. Repeat to the left side, pausing on the inhale breath and moving on the exhale. Next, exhale and turn your head to look over the right shoulder. Inhale and return to center. Exhale, look over the left shoulder. Continue to slowly alternate between each position.

Tip: There are many small muscles to stretch between positions A and B. Take your time throughout the movement phase to gently release each muscle.
Start in a comfortable seated or kneeling position, with the head stacked directly above the shoulders and the arms resting by the sides. Inhale to prepare. Exhale and slowly and gently lower the left ear towards the left shoulder, and then take the chin towards the chest. Inhale as you continue to circle, taking the right ear towards the right shoulder, and finishing by stacking the head above the shoulders in your starting position. Reverse the circle.

**Tip:** Match the pace of movement to your slow breaths, exploring each position as you transfer through it.
Shoulder Shrug

Start in a comfortable seated or kneeling position, with the head stacked directly above the shoulders and the arms resting by the sides. Inhale and lift the shoulders up towards the ears. Exhale and return them down, feeling the blades settle on the back.

Tip: Match the pace of movement to your slow breaths, exploring each position as you transfer through it.
Start in a high kneeling position or seated on a chair, with the head stacked directly above the shoulders and the arms resting by the sides, palms facing in and thumb forward. Inhale, reach the left arm straight up to the ceiling, and pause. Exhale, rotate the palm away from your body, and continue to circle the arm until it is back down by the hip, palm facing out and baby finger forward. Inhale and begin to reverse the circle, stretching the arm behind you and up to the ceiling. Pause. Exhale, rotate the palm back to the body, stretch the arm all the way forward and return it down by your side, palm facing in.

**Tip:** Really stretch out through your arm as you make this circle, taking up as much space in the room as you can; keep your head, neck and hips relaxed.
Start in a high kneeling position or seated on a chair, with the head stacked directly above the shoulders and the arms stretched directly out to the side, in line with the shoulders, palms forward. Inhale to prepare. For one long exhale: reach the arm up overhead, palm forward; the left arm down by your hip, palm back; bend the elbows and reach the fingers towards each other at the center of your back. Stay for a full inhale and exhale. Inhale again to return to the starting position. Exhale to repeat on the other side. Continue slowly alternating between each position.

Tip: It doesn’t matter if you can’t touch your fingertips, over time you will be able to!
Scapula Slide  
10-15 REPS

Start on all fours, wrists under shoulder and knees under hips, with a long flat back. You must press firmly into your palms and fingertips to feel the engagement through your mid back. Keeping the elbows STRAIGHT, inhale and slide the shoulder blades (scapula) together (you’ll feel as if you’re dropping your chest to the floor). Exhale, press into the hands and return to the starting position.

Tip: You must keep your elbows straight! If this is challenging to do on all fours, stand up and place your hands against the wall to perform the exercise.

Neck Retractions  
6-8 REPS

Start by lying on your back, knees bent, arms down by the side and the eyes straight up to the ceiling. Inhale, gently jut the chin forward to the ceiling, keeping the back of the head on the floor. Exhale, retract the chin in towards the throat, and feel the back of the neck lengthen.

Tip: Don’t jut the chin forward too much; it’s a small move. Focus on lengthening the neck against the floor during the retraction phase.
If you are suffering from lower back or hip pain, you are not alone. More than 26 million Americans, between the ages of 20 and 64, experience back pain (1) and, very often, lower back and hip pain are related.

In our current age of technology, many of us find ourselves sitting in front of the computer for most of the day. All of this sitting can cause tightness in the hamstrings, shoulders, and hip flexors, as well as a weakening of the core (abdominals, lower back, and glutes).

Our deepest hip flexor, the Psoas, is directly connected to our lumbar spine. So if our hip flexors get tight, they will begin to tug uncomfortably at the lower spine, thus causing stiffness and achiness in the lower back and uncomfortable hip pain.

Fortunately, regularly stretching can help reverse some of this tightness. Here are 9 easy stretches that can be done just about anywhere to relieve lower back and hip pain.

**Child’s Pose**

**HOLD 30 SEC**

This basic yoga pose stretches the entire back and helps to open up the hips by stretching the glutes.

1. Begin on your hands and knees in a tabletop position. Bring your big toes together and take your knees out wide.
2. Sit your hips back on your heels, and walk your hands forward until you can lower your forehead to the ground.
3. Once your forehead is on the ground, continue walking your hands out in front of you until your arms are straight. Then, let your arms relax on the ground. Try to keep your shoulders away from your ears.
This stretch reduces hip pain and releases the lower back by stretching the glutes, piriformis, and the lower back.

1. Begin by lying down on your back. Bend your knees and place your feet on the ground, hips-width distance apart.
2. Bend your right knee and place your right ankle above your left knee on the thigh. Loop your right hand through your legs and interlace your hands behind your left thigh.
3. Keep your head and shoulders on the ground as you draw the left thigh towards you. Feel the stretch through your outer right hip.
Figure 4 Twist

This stretches the lower back and helps to increase external hip rotation to reduce hip pain.

1. Start by lying down on your back. Bend your knees and place your feet on the ground, hips-width distance apart.
2. Bend your right knee and place your right ankle above your left knee on the thigh. Cactus your arms by your head and flex your feet.
3. Allow your knees to gently fall to the right, keeping the right ankle over the left thigh, to bring your body into a twist. Keep your feet flexed as you feel the stretch through your left hip. Hold for 30 seconds and then switch sides.
Runner’s Lunge

HOLD 30 SEC PER SIDE

This stretches the hip flexors, quadriceps, and abdominal muscles.

1. Start in a tabletop position on your hands and knees. Step your right foot outside of your right hand. Heel-toe the foot forward and out a couple of inches so that your right ankle is slightly in front of your right knee. Keep your left knee down.

2. Keeping your hands planted inside of your right foot, press your hips forward to feel a stretch through the front of your hips.

3. Hold for 30 seconds and then switch sides.
Adductor Opener

This stretch opens up the adductor muscles and the hip flexors.

1. Begin standing with your feet out wide, heels in, and toes pointing out at 45 degree angles.
2. Squat low like you are going to sit into a chair and then place your hands on your inner thighs.
3. Press your thighs open to feel a stretch through the inner thighs and groin. Hold for 30 seconds.
Wide-Legged Forward Fold

1. Start standing with your feet out wide and your toes pointing straight ahead.
2. Bend into your knees as you fold your chest over your legs and bring your hands to the ground.
3. Keep the generous bend in your knees, and let your head hang heavy. Let the weight shift slightly towards your toes. Feel the glutes, lower back, and hamstrings release. Hold for 30 seconds and then slowly stand by rolling up one vertebrae at a time.

This stretches the glutes, lower back, upper back, and hamstrings.
This stretches the outer hips and the lower back.

1. Starting in a seated position, place your bent right knee on top of your bent left knee. Try to have your knees perfectly stacked, one on top of the other, and to have your feet flexed to protect your knees. Both of your sit bones should be pressing into the ground. If this is not possible, then prop your hips up onto a blanket or pillow to allow equal and even weight on both sit bones.

2. Sit up nice and tall, and take some deep breaths into your hips. If you feel like you want to go a little deeper, you can walk your hands out in front of you, making sure to keep your sit bones pressing down.

3. Hold for 30 seconds.
Seated Twist

This stretch releases the lower back, glutes, and piriformis.

1. Start seated with your knees bent and your feet on the ground. Draw your left heel in towards your right sit bone. Cross your right leg over your left to bring your right foot outside of your left thigh. If this feels too intense, prop your hips up on a blanket or pillow.

2. Tent your fingertips behind you and sit up tall. Take a deep breath as you lengthen through your spine, then exhale to twist to the right, wrapping your left arm around the front of your right shin.

3. Keep your neck long and gaze straight ahead or over your right shoulder. Hold for 30 seconds and then slowly untwist on an inhale. Switch sides.
This stretch opens up the lower back and stretches the hip flexors.

1. Begin by lying down on your back.
2. Bend your knees and draw them up towards your chest. Bring your arms inside of your thighs and reach for the outside edges of your feet or ankles. Make sure that your lower back stays pressing into the floor. If you need to, hold on closer to your knees, so that you keep the lower back on the floor.
3. Take some gentle rocks side to side to massage the lower back. Hold for 30 seconds.
Are your legs feeling sore and tight from lower-body workouts or long runs? Using a foam roller can help. It releases muscle tension in the glutes, hamstrings, quads, and calves, which can also relieve low back pain.

A foam roller applies pressure to certain trigger points in the fascial tissue (i.e., connective tissue), which wraps around your muscles. This technique is known as trigger-point therapy or myofascial release. Foam rolling the legs after a workout can ease pain and stiffness in both the legs and low back, speed up recovery, and improve overall athletic performance (1) (2) (3).

The Benefit of Foam Rolling Vs. Stretching

Traditional, static stretching is designed to relax the muscles themselves. But trigger-point therapy relaxes the connective tissue that wraps around the muscles.

Imagine a beetle caught in a sticky cobweb. A beetle usually has the ability to move freely; it can walk and fly with ease. But its range of motion would be restricted by a cobweb surrounding it.

Now envision your muscles as the beetle, and your fascia as the cobweb. To improve mobility in the muscles, you must first improve mobility in the fascia.

Foam Rolling for Lower-Body Release

The human body contains a complex network of interconnected muscles, ligaments, and connective tissue. So pain in one area may actually be caused by tightness in an entirely different region.

For example, consider the quadriceps and hamstrings. Both play a role in bending and extending the knee, and have muscles that connect to the pelvis. So stiffness in the hamstrings or quadriceps could create pain in the knees or hips.

And what about low-back tension? Should you roll on your low back? No, absolutely not.

There are too many small, vulnerable bones in the low back, and they’re not designed for intense pressure. However, using a foam roller to release muscles that connect
to the low back via the pelvis (such as the piriformis, hip flexors, and quads) is a safe, beneficial technique for easing low-back pain.

**How to Choose a Foam Roller**

Foam rollers come in different sizes and densities. Smoother, softer rollers are beneficial for certain demographics, particularly the elderly and those recovering from injury. But most people find that a high-density roller provides the greatest level of support and tension release. Dense foam rollers are also more durable, and more appropriate for long-term use.

Some rollers have raised ridges and spikes, which allow you to be far more targeted in your trigger-point therapy. These rollers are fantastic for athletes, committed gym-goers, and anyone who wants to take their self-massage to the next level.

Foam rolling can be uncomfortable, but it is effective. Remember that you’re in control of how much body weight you place on the roller; less weight is less intense, and vice versa. If you were to quantify pressure, aim for four out of ten. Discomfort higher than a five is considered pain, so it’s no longer effective.

**Here are some tips for getting the most out of your foam roller experience:**

- Hold the foam roller at each individual trigger point for 20-30 seconds, without rolling on or off that spot.
- Some muscles have several areas of tension. Take your time, and pay attention to the entire region. After each 30-second hold, you can subtly move the roller to a new trigger point on that same muscle.
- To roll correctly, start at one end of the muscle. Then slowly roll your way to the other end. To find your trigger points, you may need to repeat this action a couple of times on each muscle.
- To stay balanced and aligned, work on the same muscle group on both sides of the body.

**13 Foam Roller Exercises for Sore, Tight Legs**

To warm the muscles and prepare the body for efficient movement, you can do the following exercises before your workout. Or you can do them afterward to increase blood flow, reduce muscle soreness, and nourish the fascia.
Lie with the foam roller under your hips (at the tops of your thighs). Rest your forearms on the ground to support your body. Keep your feet off the floor, and slowly roll toward your knees. (But don’t roll over your knees.) Pause when you feel a tender spot. Make sure to keep your hips up. Don’t let your stomach or hips sink toward the ground.

To add more pressure, stack one leg on top of the other, and roll one leg at a time.

Lie with the foam roller directly under the front hip crease, below the projecting “hip-bone” points of your pelvis (the anterior superior iliac spine). Rest your forearms and feet on the ground to support your body. To increase pressure on the left hip flexor (which is located towards the outer part of your pelvic region), bend the right knee towards the side. Slowly roll up-and-down and side-to-side over this muscle.
Prone Hip Flexor Stretch

Lie on your back with your knees bent. Place the foam roller horizontally below your hips. (It should rest on the flat ledge of your sacrum, not your low back.) Extend the right leg, keeping your foot on the ground. To increase the stretch, hug the left knee to your chest. Hold the stretch for 30 seconds before switching sides.

Shin (Tibialis Anterior)

Start on your hands and knees. Place the foam roller under the front right shin—just below your knee, and slightly to the inside edge of the shin bone. Engage your abdominals, and keep your back flat. Place as much weight on the foam roller as you can tolerate.

Slowly roll along the front of your shin towards your ankle. Pull your knee towards your hands, but keep your hands still. As you roll, pay attention to any trigger spots—where you can stay and hold until the muscle stops spasming.
Hamstrings

Sit on the foam roller with your legs straight out in front of you. Place your hands behind you on the ground for support. Adjust your position, so the foam roller sits right where the backs of your legs connect to your buttocks. Slowly roll toward your knees, pausing on any tender spot.
To find any additional knots before stopping, slightly turn your legs in or out. To add more pressure, stack one leg on top of the other. Since your arms are holding you up, you may need to take a break every few minutes to let them rest.

Calves

Follow the same steps for hamstrings. However, start with the foam roller just below your knees, and roll toward your ankles. Again, to hit the entire muscle group, try slightly turning your legs in or out.
Glutes

Sit on the foam roller with your knees bent and feet on the ground. Cross one leg over the other knee, then slightly tilt your body to the side of the leg that’s lifted. Prop yourself up with one hand behind you on the ground. Slowly roll between your sit bone toward your hips.

To find tight spots, you may need to slightly adjust to the right or left as needed.
**Inner Thighs (Adductors)**

Lie on your stomach, and place the foam roller parallel to the side of your body. Bend one leg to 90 degrees, and place the inner thigh on the roller (just above the knee). Rest your forearms on the floor, and roll sideways. Move the roller towards your hips, pausing at tender spots.

**Outer Thigh and IT Band**

Lie sideways on the roller, so it sits just lower than your hip. Rest on your forearm, and lift your bottom leg off the floor. Cross your top leg over it, and place your foot on the floor. Keep your body in a straight line as you roll toward your knee. Be careful not to round your body at the hips. To increase the pressure, stack your legs.
Follow the same procedure for the IT band, but start with the foam roller just above the ankle. Roll towards the area just below your knee. To increase pressure, stack your legs.
Leg Rotations

Lie on your back. Keep your legs straight and rest the back of your ankles on the roller. Maintaining straight legs, externally rotate your thighs. Point the heels in, but point the knees and toes out. Then internally rotate your legs—so that the heels point out, and the knees and toes point in towards each other. Keep slowly alternating between external and internal rotation, allowing the femur head to move freely within the hip socket.

Butterfly Opens

Lie on your back with your knees bent. Arch your feet on the roller. Allow the knees to fall open to the sides in a butterfly stretch. Hold this stretch for 60 seconds, which will allow gravity to take your knees closer to the floor.

Mobility

These final three exercises are designed to follow the trigger-point series above. Once the fascia has been relaxed through direct foam rolling, you can then follow up with specific mobility exercises, which further relax the hips and low back.
Supported Yogi Squat

Stand with you feet hip-width distance apart. Horizontally hold the roller between both hands. The toes are slightly wider than the heels. Keep your weight in your heels. Bend both knees, and lower the hips into a squat. Press your palms into the roller. Keep your chest lifted and spine upright. Hold the squat for 60 seconds before releasing.
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