

Ease Back Pain

by Erin O'Donnell

Use these key stretches to help relieve tension in the spine and build a stronger, healthier back

If you suffer from low-back pain, you've got company: At any given time, an estimated 31 million Americans are experiencing it, too. The problem frequently stems from too much sitting, a position that shortens key muscles and tightens your fascia, an overlooked connective tissue that encases and intersects with the muscles. "This pulls your spine forward and downward, creating compression that causes pain over time," explains New York-based physical therapist Ming Chew, author of *The Permanent Pain Cure*. He helped design the following workout to elongate the fascia and stretch those muscles. For best results, practice these moves most days of the week—and boost your results by drinking plenty of water. It's another way to keep your fascia supple and back pain at bay.

1 Psoas Stretch

What it does Targets the psoas, a muscle that connects the lower spine to the hip; eases sciatica; counteracts the office-worker hunch; creates space and mobility for certain internal organs.

How to do it Bend your right leg to 90 degrees, resting your left knee on a mat or pillow. Tilt your torso to the right and place your hands on top of your right knee. Contract your left buttock and your abdominal muscles and imagine that you're dragging your left knee forward (though the knee should not move). Breathe as naturally as you can. Hold for 20 seconds, come out of it to relax for 10 seconds, and then return to the position for 30 seconds. Repeat on the other side.



2 Sitter's Stretch

What it does Offsets the effects of sitting for long periods; relieves hip pain.

How to do it While sitting in a chair, cross your left ankle over your right knee. Draw your left knee in to your chest, wrapping your arms around it and pulling it toward your right shoulder. Lift your chest and squeeze your shoulder blades together. Keep your abs engaged to prevent your back from rounding. Breathe naturally and hold for 20 seconds. Relax for 10 seconds, and then return to the position for 30 seconds. Repeat with the right leg.



3 Hamstring Stretch

What it does Releases tension in the lower back; gives you a lighter, more efficient stride.

How to do it Place your left heel on a surface at about knee height, such as a chair or step. (If you're inflexible, choose a lower surface; if you're very flexible, you'll need something higher to get a good stretch.) Flex your toes toward your shins. Place your hands on your leg just above your kneecap. Lift your chest and squeeze your shoulder blades together. Lean your torso forward gently until you feel a stretch at the back of your calf, knee, and thigh. Breathe naturally and hold for 20 seconds. Relax, and then return to the position for 30 seconds. Repeat on the right side.



"This stretch will make your gait feel more fluid," says Chew.