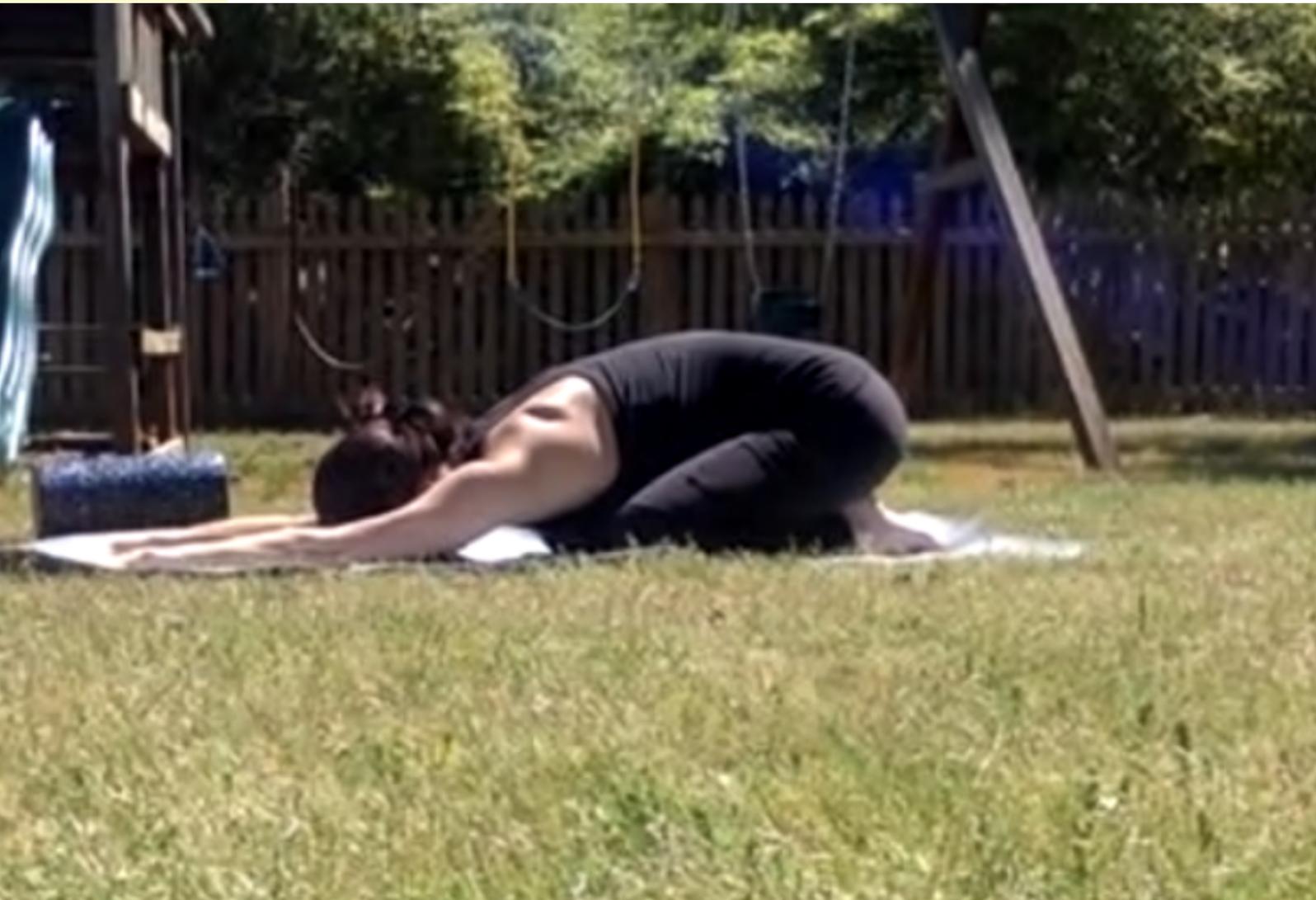




8 AMAZING SELF STRETCHES FOR LOW BACK PAIN



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MOVING AGAIN

BY DR. LISA SHAW, PT

Dealing with low back pain? You're not alone! Over 80% of Americans experience at least one episode of low back pain in their lifetime.

Recently, I had a case of low back pain. I was sitting at the computer for a long time and then hopped up to reorganize a closet. I lifted something and... you know the story. It happens to the best of us. Good news though! Most back pain is not the concerning kind, and typically responds very well to movement. Research shows that early mobility can actually help during the healing process with low back pain. While you may need to rest for a day or two, it is important to get moving again as quickly as possible.

What movement is the best? That is a great question! There are several movements and stretches that all of us can do routinely to help relieve or prevent pain and stiffness. Listed below are some of my favorite stretches for the spine. Areas of focus are opening up the upper chest, stretching the front of the hips, and stretching the spine. First, find a place to do these exercises where you can enjoy just breathing and moving. It may be helpful to invest in some tools, such as a mat and foam roller. Please reach out to your physical therapist if any of these exercises cause discomfort or any additional pain. If at any time you experience sudden numbness or weakness in your trunk or legs, stop and call your physical therapist or doctor.

Tip: Find an outdoor location to stretch. The physical benefits of sunlight and being in nature are plentiful. The sun provides vitamin D to build the immune system. Being in nature has been proven to trigger chemical responses that promote a sense of wellbeing in your body and mind. Even a few minutes is helpful.



Cat and Cow

A common yoga exercise, this is a great way to stretch the spine and focus on breathing. You can also incorporate work on your pelvic floor at the same time.



Start on all fours with your back straight, hands under the shoulders and knees under the hips. To do the cat stretch, slowly exhale and tuck your chin to your chest as you round your back and press it towards the sky. Try to see which part of your back feels tightest, the lower or upper part, and focus on stretching there.

Tip: Typically hold stretches for 30-60 seconds, repeat several times. Stay in a pain free range. Mild stretching discomfort is usually okay but reach out if you have questions about what you are feeling.

To do the cow stretch, slowly inhale and let the belly fall toward the floor to arch the back and extend the head at the same time.

Slowly alternate between the cat and cow positions.

To add pelvic floor focus: as you exhale and move into the cat position, do a kegel while engaging your abdominal muscles. Hold for 4-6 seconds. As you inhale and move into the cow position, release the pelvic floor muscles as you stretch them, moving the tailbone towards the sky. Try to breathe in for 4-6 seconds and out for 4-6 seconds.

Avoid locking the elbows or letting the shoulders shrug towards your ears.



Thoracic Extension on the Foam Roller

Aaaaah, this is a favorite stretch. Keep this one on repeat. It stretches the thoracic spine into extension, overcoming often-used forward postures. You can use a towel roll in place of a foam roller. A medium density foam roller is recommended for comfort. If yours feels too firm, feel free to add a gardening pad or folded towel.



Place your foam roller on the floor and lie on your back with your knees bent and the foam roller at the level of your mid-back (start lower than shown in photo allowing you to repeat in several places).

Cradle your head with your hands, and inhale and extend back. Lower your head as close as you can to the floor until you feel a stretch behind your back. **Make sure the stretch is coming from your back and not just your neck extending. Exhale and use your abs to bring you up again.

Tip: You can incorporate some abdominal work with this one by engaging your core as you exhale and flex back up.

Repeat 3 times to mobilize that area. Then, lift your hips and roll so that the roller is just a little higher on your back. Repeat 3 extensions here. Continue to move the roller up until you are at the high back/top of the shoulders; there are probably 4-5 "spots" that feel tighter. Repeat 3 extensions at each spot. Alternate: You can hold the extension at one tight spot for a little while and breathe in and out for increased stretch.



Thread the Needle

This exercise is great to combine thoracic flexion and extension with rotation, providing much needed upper back mobility and releasing tension. Combine the movement with breath. Follow your hand with your eyes to stretch even farther.



Start in a four point position with the hands directly under the shoulders and the knees under the hips. Place your foam roller next to you. Keep your chin tucked in, back straight and shoulders back. Inhale to prepare, and then exhale as you rotate and thread the arm under your body, stretching into rotation by rolling your arm along the roller.

Keep the supporting arm straight or elbow slightly bent. Inhale as you rotate the opposite way, extending the arm up and out to the side. Reach long through the arm towards your fingertips. Exhale as you return down and reach for the roller again. Continue moving in each direction for 5-10 repetitions. Repeat on the opposite side.



Rolling Out the Back Muscles

This is technically not a stretch, but it's nice to include it just before or after Thread the Needle. The foam roller is a great way to mobilize back muscles that can get a little cranky from too much sitting or lifting, or even from too much exercise!



Start in the same position as in the thoracic extension exercise, then lift your hips. Keeping your head supported by your hands, roll your body on the foam roller from the upper back to the lower back by pushing with your feet as far as you can comfortably go with good control. Keep it slow and steady, don't roll quickly.

Focus on any tender spots you find, holding pressure there longer.

Tip: Just keep breathing! Anytime you are holding a stretch or foam rolling, make sure you keep breathing. Don't hold your breath or exhale forcefully, but keep your breath steady and deep to allow your body to relax into the stretch, or into the pressure in the case of foam rolling.

As you move, you can stay towards the center along the spine or you can roll slightly to one side to focus on the paraspinal muscles, the muscles to each side of the spine. Try to roll up and down one side, and then the other side.



Child's Pose

Another common yoga stretch, this one is great for releasing tension from the upper and lower back muscles. It is also commonly used to release tension in the hips and pelvis.



Tip: If you can't comfortably rest your hips down to your feet, place a pillow on top of your lower legs for your hips to rest on. You can also place a pillow under your chest. The key is to be able to relax into the position and supports are just fine.

Begin on your hands and knees. Shift your weight back so that your upper body is down on the ground and your hips are resting down onto your feet. Melt into the position and breathe in and out deeply. Focus on inhaling and releasing your spine and pelvic floor as your belly expands.

Think about letting your SIT bones float apart from each other as you breathe in and release pelvic tension, which helps to stretch the pelvic floor, especially if your knees are wide.

A great variation on this exercise is to stretch both arms over to the right, which will stretch the left side of your back and hold for a minute or two as you breathe, then stretch your arms to the left to stretch the right side of your back. Perform the Child's Pose "all 3 ways".

Pelvic Tilts

A great exercise for releasing tension in the low back, abdomen, and pelvis which might result from sitting a lot, standing a lot, pelvic floor dysfunction, or sometimes even from stress or trauma. The best way to complete this exercise is to focus simply on moving and breathing.



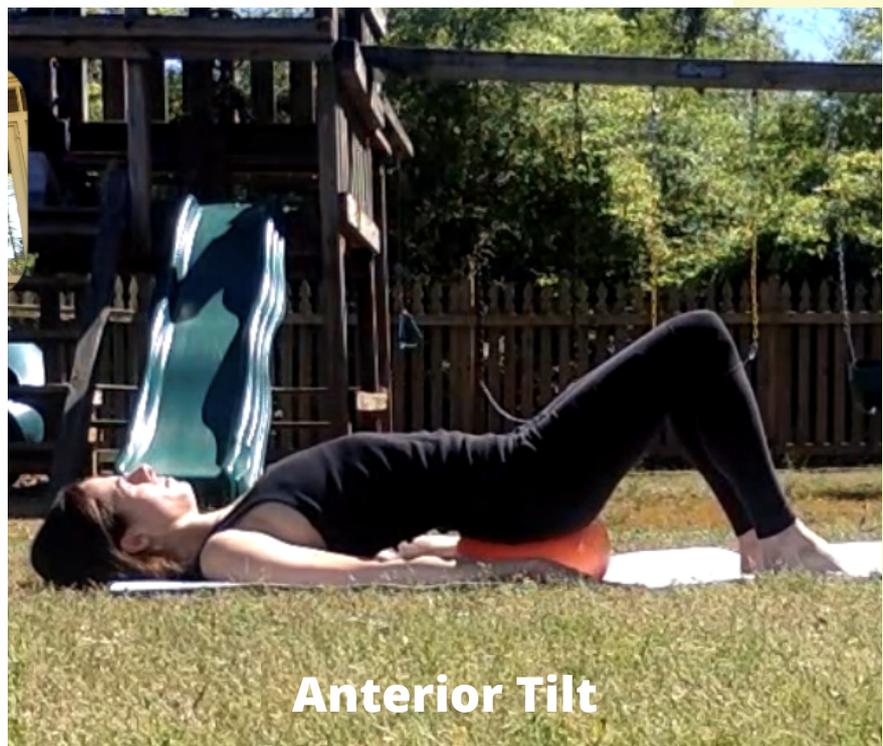
Posterior Tilt

Lie on your back with your knees bent. As you exhale, tuck your belly and lift your tailbone up off the floor. Your back will round as your pelvis tilts (posterior pelvic tilt). Don't lift your hips up off the ground.

Tip: Using a Pilates ball as shown or an air disk can help you gain even more mobility. Center the ball under your pelvis at the sacrum (just above the tailbone). These are commonly available online or at fitness stores.

Inhale as you move in the opposite direction, arching your back (anterior tilt). Repeat 10 times in each direction.

Maintain a slow and steady breath as you move between anterior and posterior tilt, counting to 5 as you move in each direction.



Anterior Tilt

Hip Flexor Stretch

Releasing the hip flexors, also known as the iliacus and psoas muscles, is very helpful to mobilize the hips and pelvis after a lot of sitting. This stretch also mobilizes the low back, as the psoas muscle attaches into the lumbar spine.



Tip: If this exercise bothers your knees, put a foam gardening pad, chair cushion, or even a folded towel under your knee for cushioning.

Start in a half kneeling position with one foot forward, the thigh parallel to the ground and the knee in line with the foot.

Exhale and gently engage your core. The pelvis will move into a neutral to slight posterior pelvic tilt (reviewed in the previous exercise).

Lean forward to stretch the anterior aspect of the hip on the back leg. Your trunk should stay lifted and your shoulders down and back. Your lower back should not arch. Be sure to breathe as you stretch. Hold the position for 20-30 seconds and repeat two to three times on each side.

An alternative to this stretch, the "step stance," can be done at work where space may be limited. Stand at your desk when working, place one foot up on a chair. You should support your body weight with your other leg. As you exhale, engage your core, leaning forward to feel a stretch on the front of the hip that is on the chair. This adds variety to your standing posture while working, and helps to prevent some of the tightness we see from static postures. Hold this position for 20-30 seconds as you continue to breathe.

Chest Stretch

Releasing the upper chest and neck area is necessary to give our spines good mobility - everything is connected! Tension in the neck and chest is common because many daily tasks involve use of the arms in front of the body, such as lifting, driving and working on a computer. Stretching the chest can also improve head posture, and may help ease the pain of tension headaches.



Tip: Try this stretch after driving and gripping the steering wheel for longer periods, after working at a computer, or after holding a child for a while. This is a great every day stretch.

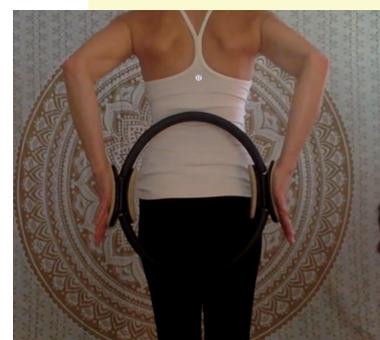
There are two options to perform this stretch:

1) Single arm: Place your forearm on a post or door frame. Place the opposite leg in front. Lean forward while rotating the trunk towards the forward leg. Take deep breaths to open the ribcage and further stretch the chest muscles while holding the position.

2) Double arm: Using a corner instead of a door frame, place one hand on each wall at shoulder height and lean forward to stretch the chest. Take deep breaths to open the ribcage and further stretch the chest muscles while holding the position.

Bonus exercise:

Use a Pilates ring / magic circle to perform shoulder blade squeezes. Hold the magic circle behind you at the level of your hips, elbows slightly bent and fingertips pointing down. Exhale to squeeze the shoulder blades together as you pull the shoulders down and back. Hold the squeeze while breathing in deeply to open the chest further. Hold 10 seconds. Repeat three to five times.



... and that's a wrap!

How did it go? Are you starting to feel better now that you just went through these exercises? GREAT! Motion is lotion and movement does a body good. How often should you do these exercises? Is there such a thing as too much? That depends on your body type and the amount and type of movement you typically do throughout the day. You may want to try to do them once or twice a day. If you are stiff in general and the exercises are helpful, try to do them a little more. If you are recovering from injury, do them once a day and see how you feel before attempting more strenuous activity. If you are busy and can only do them a few times a week, don't stress about it; work them in when you can. It may be better to split them up and perform a few at different times throughout the day. Short movement breaks every 30-60 minutes while doing computer work or sitting or standing in one position are a must. Optometrists tell us to avert our gaze from screens for a minute every 20 minutes for eye health, so you can accomplish both 1) relaxing your eyes and 2) stretching your muscles by just standing up and doing one or two stretches each hour.

The key to feeling good is to keep moving as much as possible. There is no "bad posture" but staying still in one posture for long periods of time can lead to pain and joint / muscle tightness. Shift your weight, change your position, stretch (even if very briefly) at different times during your day. If you have children, do the exercises with them, and teach them these important life habits as well.

If you have any questions about the exercises provided here, or any additional pain or injury, please visit our [website](#), or reach out to us at info@catalystga.com.

For more suggestions on how to keep moving and how to support your overall health and wellness, follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) and subscribe to our monthly [newsletter](#).

We are privileged to be a part of your health and wellness journey.