



Just Bust a Move

Counteract all that slouching and slumping and even—brace yourself—aging by improving your flexibility and range of motion. You’ll reap the benefits for years to come.

◀ **Christine Felstead teaches yoga for runners, and emphasizes alignment and increasing the range of motion in the body. The key for all stretches, she says, is to breathe. “When holding each pose, inhale and exhale through the nose. Breathe deeply to feel the breath expand the back and side ribs, and hold each pose for five to 10 breaths.”**

BY DANIELLE GROEN ● Everyone knew Christine Felstead was a runner. She was out there four or five days a week. She logged upwards of 150 kilometres each month. She’d even knocked off a pair of marathons. Plus, it was clear she was a runner from the way she moved: In the morning, she’d hobble to the bathroom, where a long, hot shower was required to straighten out her spine; in the evening, out for drinks, she struggled to pull herself up from her chair. By 2001, after 20-odd years of solid running and creeping stiffness, Felstead finally had an awakening. “It was hard to say I didn’t want to run anymore, because it had become such a big part of my identity,” she says. But she was barely in her 40s. “I didn’t want to keep waking up feeling like I was 95.”

You don’t have to be a marathoner, however, to suspect your body might actually belong to a nonagenarian. So many of our daily activities, from driving to desk-sitting to doom-scrolling on our smartphones, serve to keep us static; throw in 19 months of a global pandemic, which left most of us clenched like hell, and it’s little wonder we’re all achy and tight.

That can be especially scary when, like Felstead back in 2001, you’ve barely reached middle age—if things are this bad now, the future must mean a sentence to Tin Man-levels of creakiness. “The physiology in our body changes over the years, and we do get stiffer—that’s just the physiological effect of getting old,” says Melissa Doldron, a registered massage therapist at Toronto’s Rebalance Sports Medicine clinic. “But no one wants to be that caricature of the hunched-over old person.”

Here’s what’s going on: As we age, our muscle mass drops, our tendons and connective tissue become more stiffer, and we lose muscle fibres, which means our muscles aren’t as quick as they once were. “We become slower, and people often start having trouble with their shoulders, hips, ankles, and spine,” says Lora Giangregorio, University of Waterloo professor and Schlegel Research Chair in Mobility and Aging. Our mobility—which is to say, our capacity to move our bodies through their whole range of motion—starts to suffer. That’s when it can become considerably harder to function the way we want to, whether that’s carrying heavy groceries and putting

them away, or climbing up and down the stairs, or bending over to lace up our shoes. But while aging is (regrettably) inevitable, problems with mobility don't have to be. Giangregorio says when it comes to mobility, it really is the use-it-or-lose-it paradigm: "If you want to maintain mobility, you have to actively use your muscles and take your joints through their range of motion." Doing so will not only make everyday tasks easier but lead to better long-term health outcomes like improved vascular function, reduced cognitive impairment, lower rates of depression and a higher likelihood of aging at home. Setting yourself up for those future health perks might begin by working to get your arms over your head without bending your elbows; it could mean doing ankle rolls. It probably involves regular exercise and a little strength training; that, Giangregorio says, will give you maximum

The Copenhagen Plank is a full body challenge. It stretches and strengthens your hamstrings, quads, glutes and adductors (inner thighs), and engages your upper body, improving scapular and shoulder mobility and upper-to-mid back strength.



bang for your buck. She's also partial to the Myrtl routine, a series of exercises that help with mobility—she does it herself. Ultimately, what matters most is just that you move. "We say this a lot in our business: Motion is lotion," Doldron says. She often hears from people looking for a very specific playbook of exercises, but she usually tells them to stick with whatever they enjoy. "It doesn't have to be complicated: I recommend people think about all the different ways their joints are supposed to move," she says. "And then they should create their own way of moving every day that feels good to them." For Felstead, that meant finally trading in her running shoes for a yoga mat. She'd always had a rather cavalier attitude toward stretching: At the end of a 15-kilometre run, she would rather hang around chatting with friends than head off to roll

out her muscles. But after attending a yoga retreat in 2000, she couldn't believe the difference in her body. She walked without stiffness. Her joints felt fluid. Over time, her range of motion improved exponentially. She began teaching yoga to other runners, designing a practice meant to keep them healthy and on the road. "I was told to teach what I know, and what I knew was tight bodies," Felstead says. And while her moves are definitely impressive (just check out that Copenhagen plank, below), she's quick to emphasize that she isn't chasing the most advanced pose or pretzel-like shape—the goal is to build stability, mobility and strength. "I don't need to get my leg all the way over my shoulder or wrap my arm around for a bind," she says. "I can walk upright. The pain I learned to live with disappeared. And now, I'm not afraid of aging."

LETTER OF
RECOMMENDATION

Fill Your
Dance Card

"I had two hip replacements in my 50s, and I knew as I was getting older that old people fall down and break bones. I got into tai chi; I was doing restorative yoga at my community centre. Then, five or six years ago, the National Ballet School and Baycrest [Health Services] expanded their seniors' dance program to Peterborough [Ont.], which has one of the highest proportions of seniors in the country. I was excited and delighted—imagine learning dance from teachers at the National Ballet School, for Pete's sake. The classes are all about telling a story through music and movement—they know we love to canoe out here, so they might do a dance that has paddling, or something themed to the start of spring. It's such a joy. Doing the dance and the arm movements, I've found an awareness of my body that wasn't there before. My range of motion is huge; now, I can put my hands behind my back and grab my wrists, easy peasy. I slipped on the ice this winter, and all the medical people said if I hadn't been doing dance, I'd never have been able to get back up. When the pandemic hit, they eventually moved the classes online, and there's even an app now. I've had my ups and downs—I'm a hugger, and I can't hug anyone—but the classes give me a purpose and we've become a close-knit unit over the internet. All the research shows that if you're active with your body, if you're not an isolated senior lonely in your home, then you can have a long, healthy life. I'm in my late 60s, but I have a plan to get to 105."—*Ruth Snider, as told to Danielle Groen*

WE TRIED IT

Fascial Stretch
Therapy

● My left shoulder won't shut up. It started off with a few soft clicks, built to a burst of rapid pops and just crescendoed in a single, lusty crack. Face down on a massage table, I'm mortified, but registered kinesiologist Emily Hamilton—who has hooked her arm around mine to guide that noisy shoulder further back—is used to this sort of soundtrack. Bodies can be loud, especially when encouraged to roll in a direction other than their typical forward slump. In a back room at Toronto's Flxme Studio, Hamilton is leading me through a series of assisted stretches meant to release my fascia—the thin layer of connective tissue under the skin that surrounds our organs, bones, muscles, arteries and nerves. "You can almost think of fascia as a pair of pants, and like pants, it can get really tight and start to restrict your movements," Hamilton says. To get that connective tissue loose again, fascial stretch therapy (FST) involves applying gentle traction to the joints and muscles, in order to create space for a greater range of motion. "It's like a tune-up for the body," Hamilton says. "Instead of just focusing on a sore muscle or joint, we're unlocking all different sets of muscles to help with mobility and take care of the body as a whole." And it feels fantastic, like some sublime combination of physiotherapy, yoga and massage. My hip flexors and hamstrings—which, due to diligent running and much less diligent stretching, are always tight—release onto the table; as Hamilton hikes my ankle onto her shoulder and lengthens my quadriceps, I begin to make sounds of my own. "We all need to bring more movement into our bodies," she says. And while it's very nice to have a lovely stretch therapist do the work for me, Hamilton says doing a couple basic movements on our own can pay enormous dividends. "Just rolling our shoulders around, or a few twists of the back, or swinging a leg side to side when you're doing the dishes—it all counts," she says. "Something as simple as that will still have a big effect."—*D.G.*





Felstead wears Lolë's Performance Wool Workout Tank in white, \$49, the Step Up Ultra High Waisted Ankle Leggings in eucalyptus, \$99, and the Step Up One Piece in saffron, \$149, lollelife.com.

◀
CLOCKWISE
FROM
TOP LEFT

1.
The Standing Figure 4 works on balance, leg strength and hip external rotation. It relieves tightness in your hips and feels especially good after sitting for many hours.

2.
The Low Lunge targets lower body stiffness and is amazing for the hip flexors and for upper body strength.

3.
The Sphinx mobilizes the spine, relieves upper back and shoulder stiffness and improves upper body posture.

4.
The Seated Twist is a great spinal rejuvenation to relieve lower back pain and upper back rounding.

VITALS

YOU SHOULD
TRY IT

Tai Chi

● It's often called meditation in motion: a choreography of slow, fluid positions with wonderfully poetic names like "White Crane Spreads Wings" and "Wave Hands Like Clouds." But don't be fooled by the gentle exterior—when it comes to improving muscle strength and endurance, flexibility and range of motion, and even cardiovascular and neurological health, tai chi packs a serious punch.

Unlike running and swimming, for example—activities that are all forward motion—tai chi involves moving the body sideways and backwards, as well. "This three-dimensional movement is good for range of motion, and it means tai chi treats muscles responsible for lateral movement, like our hips," says Jing Xian Li, a professor at the University of Ottawa's School of Human Kinetics. "Those muscles are very important for our balance, which is why tai chi can improve postural stability."

And that slow, smooth sequence of movements—"like water," Li says—demands a whole bunch of motion control, which serves to strengthen our upper and lower bodies. "Tai chi does not have the same impact on our joints as running does," Li says. "But when it comes to enhanced muscle strength and endurance, tai chi is remarkable; it's comparable to running." Not only that, tai chi can help reduce the damage on joints and cartilage that years of high-impact activity may have caused.

There's a reason Li also describes tai chi as a mind-body exercise: You aren't on auto-pilot. You're thinking about the names of the movements; you're coordinating those movements with your breath. "It deepens the connection between your body and mind," Li says. That's why studies have shown tai chi not only makes people physically stronger, but increases their confidence and reduces levels of anxiety and stress. Not too shabby for a couple of cloud hands.—D.G.