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Loosen Up!

By Joan Maiden

Are you old enough to remember the Carol Burnett Show? Tim Conway portrayed an old man that shuffled along, barely moving when he walked. It was funny on TV, but not so funny in real life. What happens? Added to weakness from muscle loss, tendons and ligaments get shorter and less flexible as we age, making it more difficult and painful to get around.

Just what are tendons and ligaments? Tendons are bands of connective tissue that connect muscles to bones and ligaments connect bone to bone. Imagine a rubber band that is shortened—it takes a lot more effort to stretch it. This makes reaching things on a shelf or picking up items off the floor more difficult—not to mention getting dressed.

Simple stretching exercises can help keep tendons and ligaments more flexible and can also help relieve pain. I have a 70 year-old client who went from walking with a cane due to back pain to giving up his cane and being relatively pain free just from doing simple stretching exercises. Tight hips can lead to difficulty walking and tight hamstrings (back of the leg) are a major cause of low back pain.

How to stretch

- Talk with your doctor when starting a stretching program, especially if you have had back or hip surgery.

- Always warm up before stretching. Warm muscles, tendon and ligaments are more pliable, reducing the risk of injury.
- Always remember to breathe normally while holding a stretch.
- Stretching may feel slightly uncomfortable; a mild pulling feeling is normal but if you feel sharp or stabbing pain, or joint pain, you are stretching too far.
- Never "bounce" into a stretch. Make slow, steady movements.
- Avoid "locking" your joints. Keep your joints slightly bent while stretching.
- Slowly stretch into the desired position, as far as possible without pain, and hold the stretch for 10 to 30 seconds. Relax, breathe, then repeat, trying to stretch farther.
- You can progress in your stretching exercises. For example, as you become more flexible, try



Rectangular Snip

reaching farther, but not so far that it hurts.

Stretching is a simple way to get more freedom of movement—and just maybe you will still be able to bend over and tie your shoes at ninety.

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