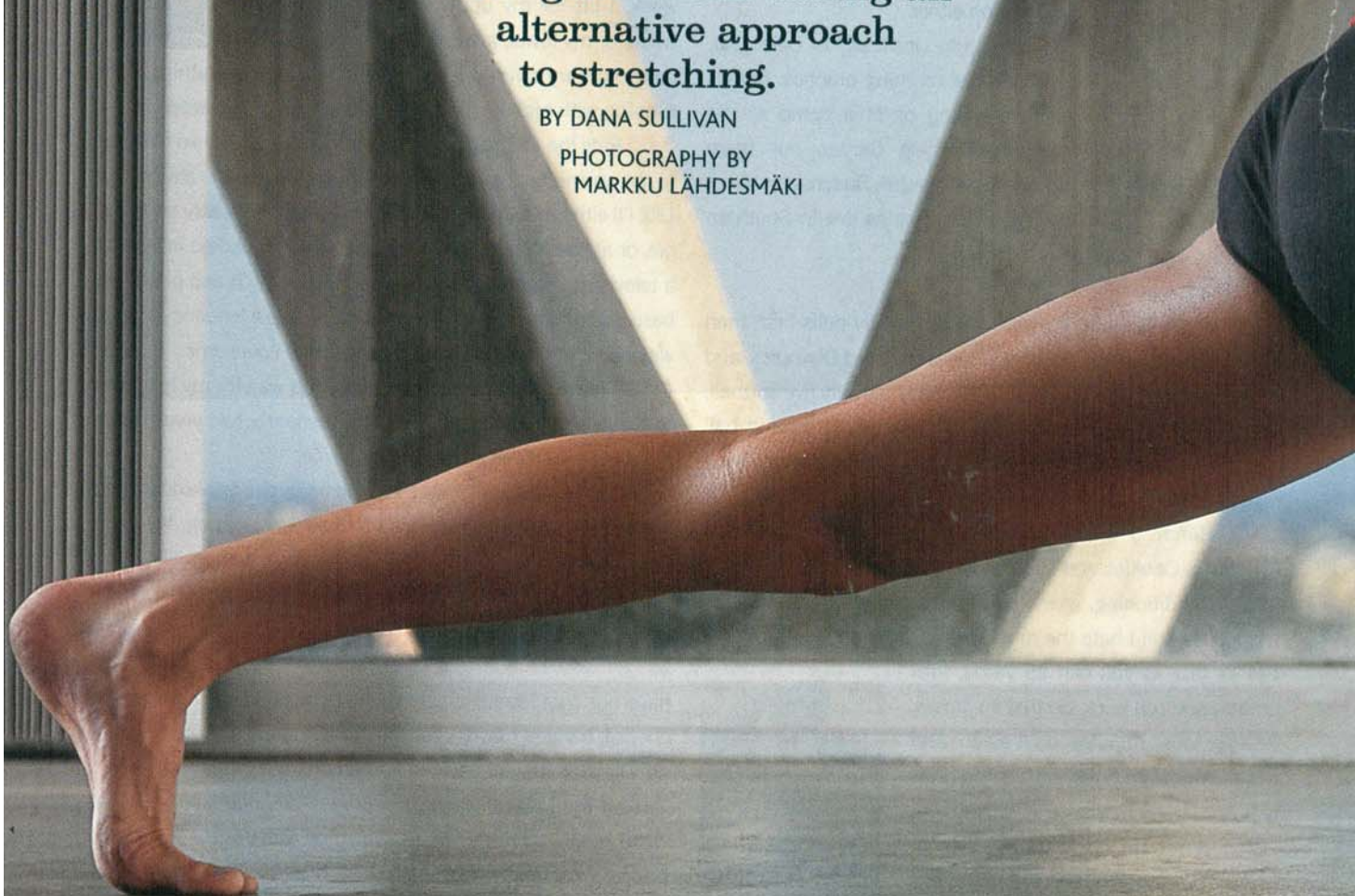


flex time

For some athletes, reaching for gold means taking an alternative approach to stretching.

BY DANA SULLIVAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
MARKKU LÄHDESMÄKI





at the Athens Olympic Games this summer, when Canadian diver Émilie Heymans stands poised atop her 10-meter perch, her secret weapon will be invisible to the spectators. But not to the judges, who will award Heymans' scores based on her approach, take-off and her entry into the water.

So what, exactly, does the 2003 world champion's arsenal include? A unique flexibility program called Classical Stretch that is equal parts Pilates, yoga, tai chi, ballet and physical therapy. "Since I started doing this program I've become a more graceful and flexible diver," says Heymans, who is expected to win a medal in the Games. "I've also noticed that my posture is much better, which has made me more self-confident in every aspect of my life."

Classical Stretch was created by Miranda Esmonde-White, a certified personal trainer and former dancer with the National Ballet of Canada. According to Esmonde-White, traditional stretching—holding a stretch position for 10 to 30 seconds—can be a painful experience, especially for those of us who are less flexible. Supertight muscles don't always respond well to a sustained stretch, and when a muscle is stretched too far or too long, it tightens up and springs back upon itself to prevent ripping and tearing. This automatic defense mechanism is known as the stretch reflex.

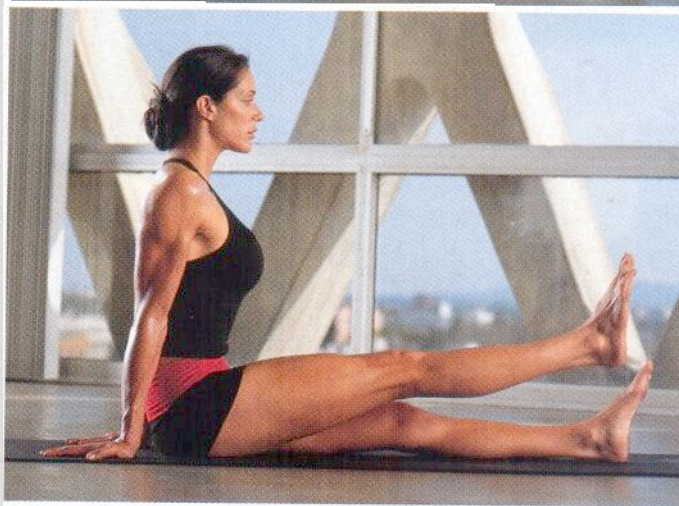
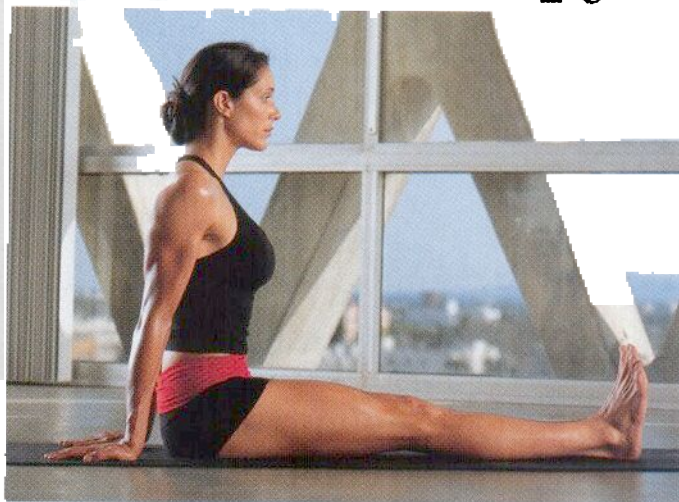
Classical Stretch avoids the stretch reflex because it involves continual motion. Each stretch flows in an unbroken chain of movement through several directions—vertically, horizontally and diagonally—which, Esmonde-White says, helps elongate the muscles thoroughly without traumatizing them. "Stretching has to be gentle yet global, and it has to balance every muscle in relation to all of the other muscles," she explains.

Esmonde-White works with members of several other Canadian Olympic teams who had been plagued with injuries. Now, she says, those athletes who faithfully follow her Classical Stretch program rarely experience problems. Because of her success, the Canadian government has funded a research project at the University of Montreal to study her theories.

Of course, Esmonde-White's program isn't just for elite athletes. "Classical Stretch is for anyone who feels their muscles are overly contracted, or their joints are jammed up," she says. And besides better flexibility, Esmonde-White promises that you'll also notice improved posture and greater ease of movement.

Esmonde-White developed the Classical Stretch routine shown here specially for *HHG* readers. She recommends doing these moves in the order given, two or three sets per move, resting for up to a minute between sets, and practicing the routine three times per week. She guarantees you will see and feel genuine, noticeable changes within six weeks.

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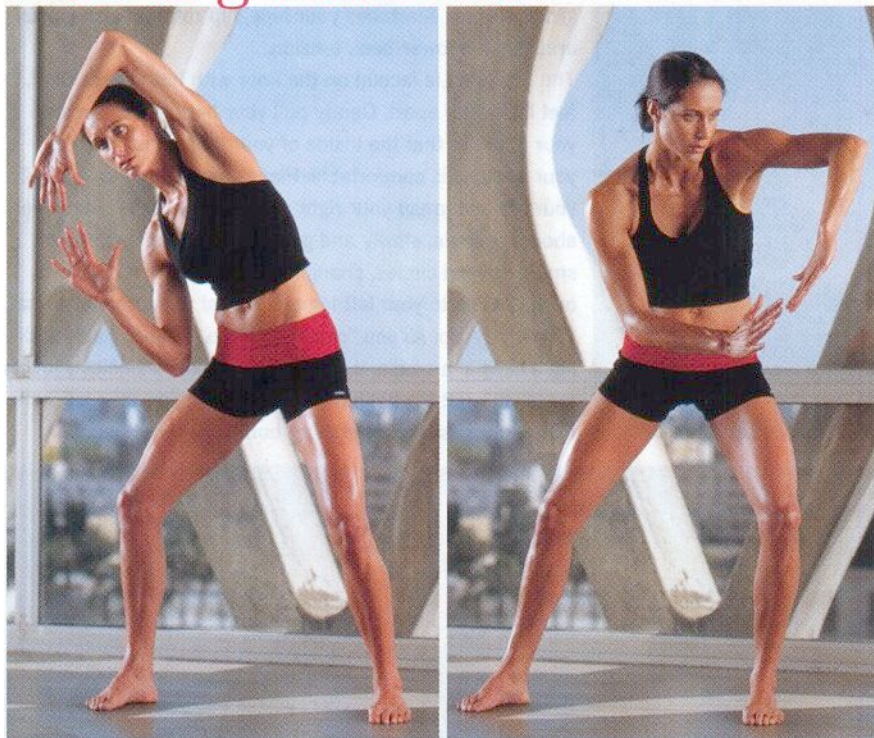
rear thigh lengthener

What It Does: Stretches and lengthens the thighs, especially the hamstrings.

The Stretch: Sit up tall on the floor with both legs straight out in front of you, knees and ankles a few inches apart, abs pulled inward. Press your right leg, from heel to glute, into the floor and, at the same time, lengthen your leg by moving your heel forward a few inches. Hold for two to five slow counts. From this elongated position, lift your right leg off the floor, without lifting your hip. Hold for two to five counts. Do eight to 10 reps, alternating left and right stretches.

Mind-Body Tip: Imagine you're trying to touch the wall in front of you by pressing forward through your heel; think of your leg muscles as taffy that's slowly stretching and pulling apart.

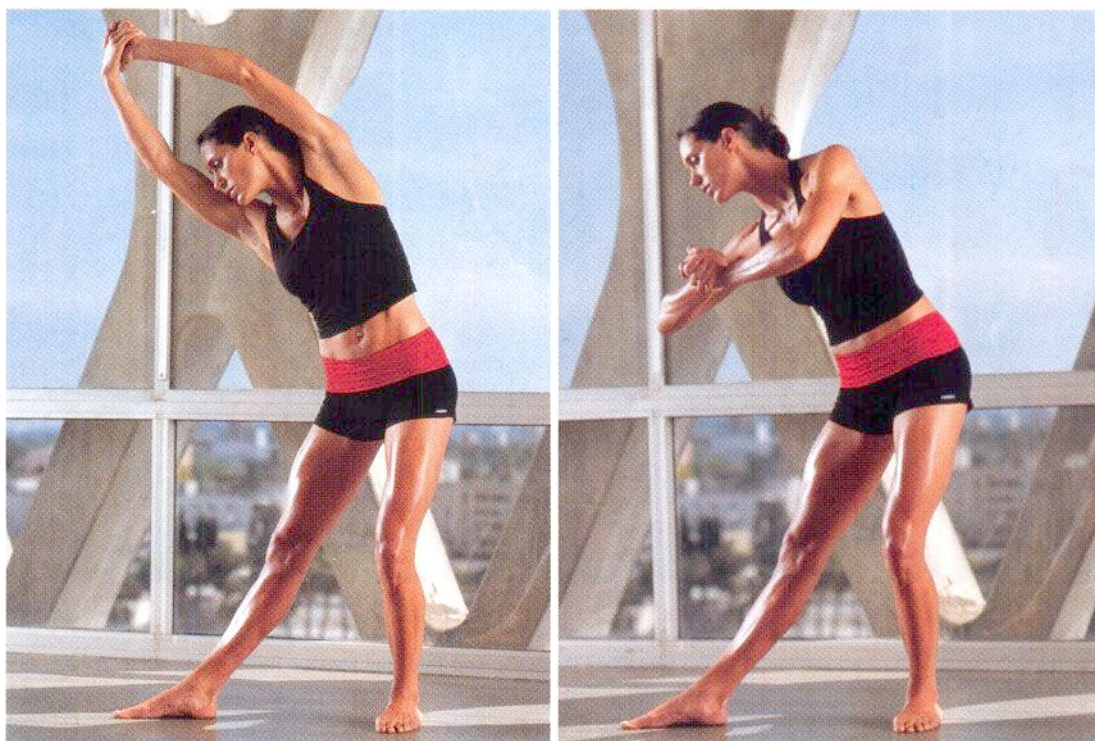
washing windows



What It Does: Relieves tension and muscle strain in the upper and middle back (rhomboids, lats and rear delts).

The Stretch: Stand tall with feet hip-width apart, navel pulled in toward your spine, and lean to the right as far as you comfortably can. Raise your arms up and bend your elbows so that your left elbow is directly over your left ear and your right elbow is near your right thigh, palms forward and fingertips of both hands nearly touching. Maintaining your arm position, slowly rotate your torso and sweep across your midline and to the left, shifting your weight onto your left foot, until your palms are facing back behind you. Retrace your path back to the starting position, shifting your weight onto your right foot. Complete five to 10 reps to the right, and then to the left to complete the set.

Mind-Body Tip: As you sweep from side to side, imagine you're dragging a wet cloth across a window with flat hands.



the bell ringer

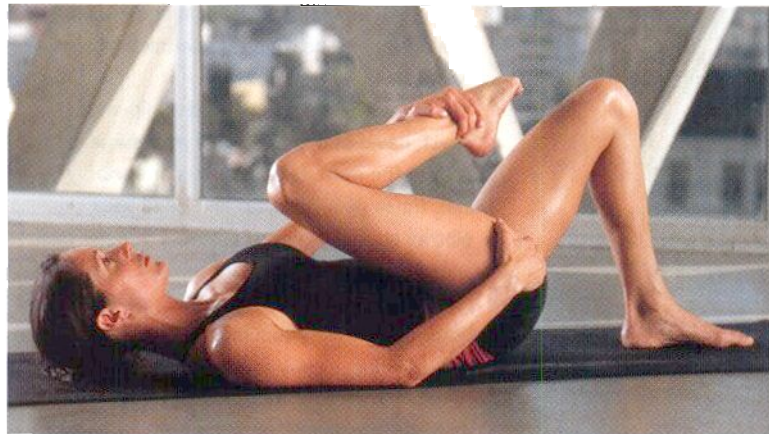
What It Does: Releases tension in the upper body by loosening the lats, spinal extensors, triceps and delts.

The Stretch: Stand tall with your feet comfortably apart, your right leg forward, left knee slightly bent.

Tighten your abs by pulling your navel toward your spine and lean to the right. Clasp your hands together, palms facing in, and raise your arms overhead. Bend your elbows and draw your hands down to your waist, slightly rotating your torso down and toward the right as you move. Stretch back up, elongating past the starting position. Perform five to six reps to the right, then switch sides to complete the set.

Mind-Body Tip: Imagine you're pulling on a rope attached to a heavy church bell. ➤

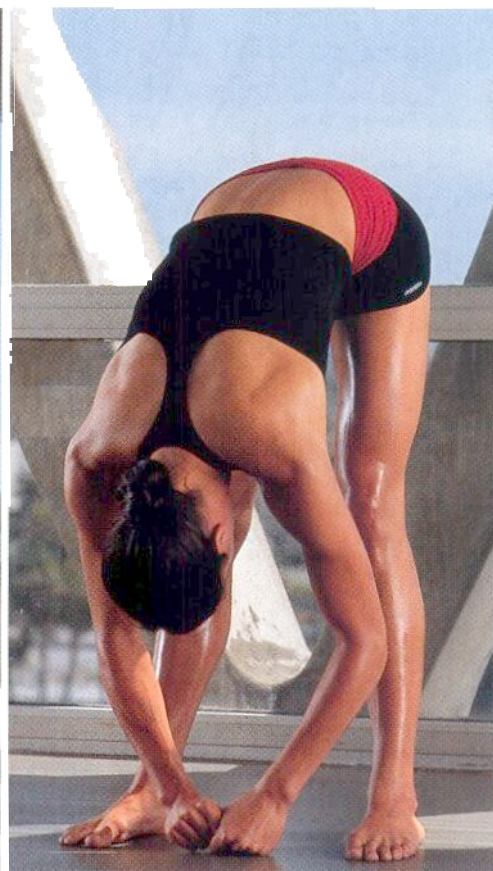
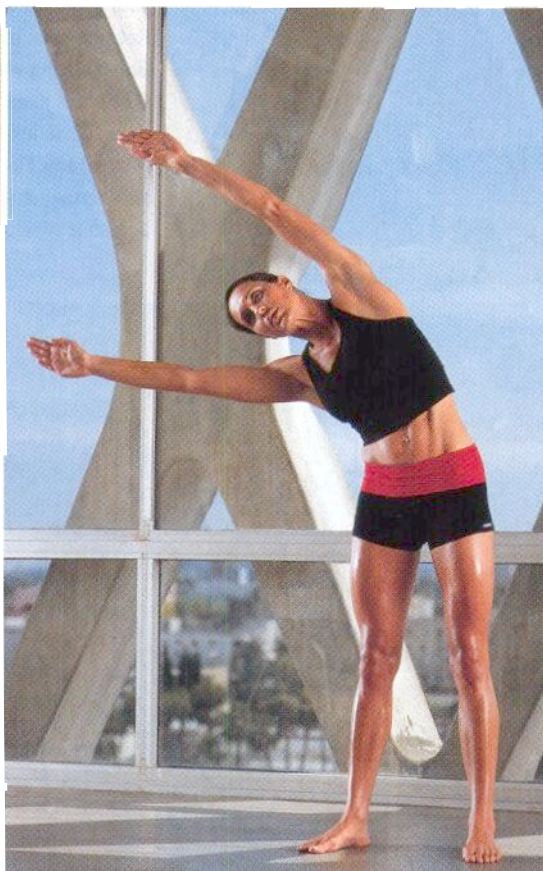
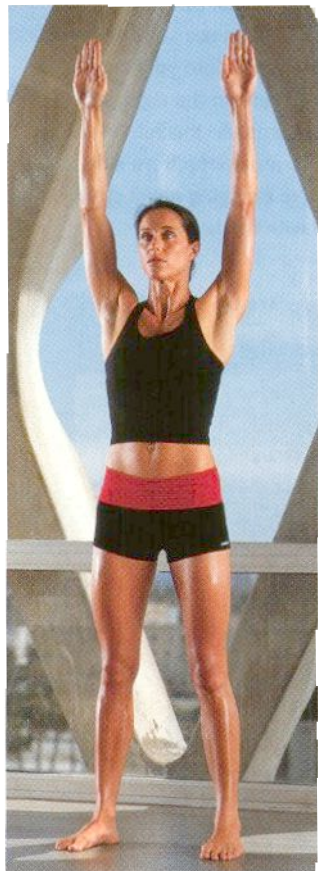
cradle stretch



What It Does: Stretches your hips, hip rotators and glutes and relieves lower-back tension.

The Stretch: Lie faceup on the floor with both knees bent, feet hip-width apart. Gently pull your bent right knee into your chest so that the inside of your thigh is as close to your body as is comfortable. Place your right palm against your hip and grasp your right ankle with your left hand. For about a minute, slowly and gently move your right hip in small, defined circles, changing direction every 10 circles or so. Switch to your left leg and repeat to complete the set.

Mind-Body Tip: As you "circle" your hip, think of gently rocking a baby in a cradle. If you have adequate flexibility, you can cross your left leg behind your right, bringing your left knee into your chest and stretching both legs simultaneously.



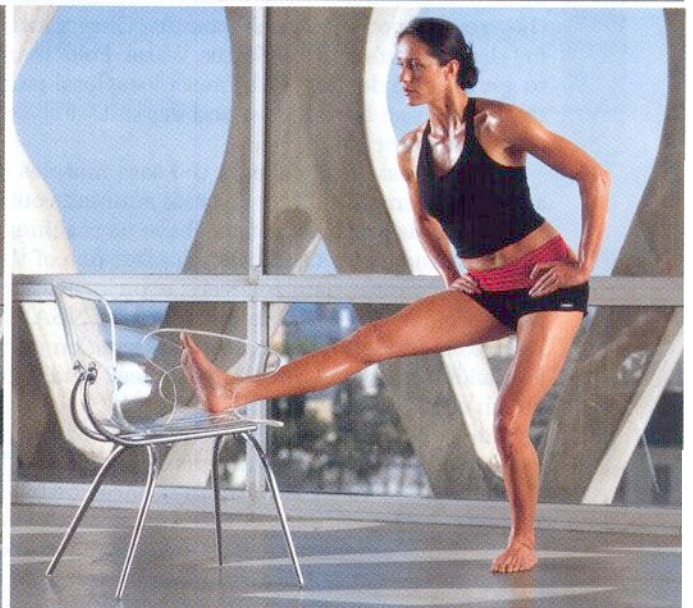
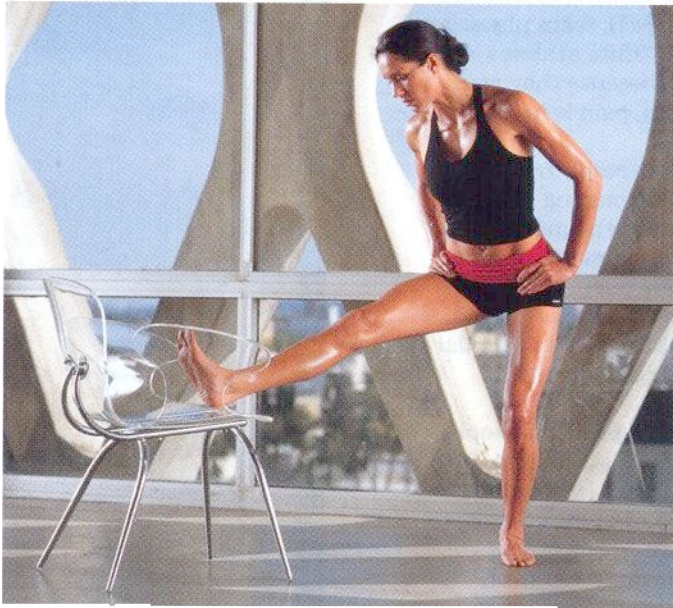
an unbroken
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the clock

What It Does: Stretches the torso and releases tension in the hips, delts, triceps and biceps.

The Stretch: Stand tall with your feet hip-width apart, knees slightly bent, abs pulled inward. With your palms facing forward, stretch your arms upward, elongating your entire body as much as possible. Hold for a count of three. Next, lean your torso slightly to the right, again elongating as much as possible and holding for a count of three. Continue doing 12, three-count stretches holding in positions that would be numbers on the face of a clock (2, 3, 4, etc.) until you have completed a circular path to the right, down toward your feet, up to the left and back to the starting position. This is one set; do the next set in a counterclockwise path.

Mind-Body Tip: Imagine that each position you hold (for a count of three) represents a numeral on the face of a clock — the first position being 1 o'clock, as you reach down toward the floor is 6 o'clock and so on. Place an equal amount of focus on each position so you get a complete, even stretch.



wag the dog

What It Does: Loosens the hamstrings and enhances mobility of the lower spine.

The Stretch: Prop your right heel up on the seat of a chair no higher than hip height; bend your left knee slightly. With a long spine, lean forward from your hips and reach toward your right toe, bringing your chest as close to your leg as you comfortably can. Hold for two to five slow counts. Straighten back up to the starting position and gently shift your hips back and forth, left and right, eight to 10 times in each direction. Complete two to three reps with the right leg, and then with the left to complete the set.

Mind-Body Tip: Focus on feeling this stretch in different points along the hamstring. As you shift your hips, imagine a puppy gently wagging its tail. ■