

# Active Stretching

More Muscle Control  
for Better Flexibility



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# Contents

<b>Introduction . . . . .</b>	<b>1</b>
Basic Guidelines. . . . .	1
Exercise Set 1 . . . . .	2

# Introduction

In relaxed stretching the focus is on relaxing the muscle being stretched. That doesn't mean that the whole body is relaxed. Actually there should be parts of the body engaged to provide a stable foundation for the muscle being stretched. That muscle can then be easier to relax so that it can be stretched.

Generally when doing relaxed stretches the driving force for the stretch is from gravity.

There are a few ways to do active stretching.

One of the main differences from relaxed stretching is that instead of relying on gravity to provide the stretching force the focus can be on using opposing muscles to stretch the target muscle.

You have to work to do active stretching.

Another type of active stretching is where the muscle being stretched is active, but lengthening.

Both types of stretch are covered in Active stretching. I call the first technique **Muscle Assisted Stretching** and the second technique **Muscle Resisted Stretching**.

A third variation is where external muscle power is used to resist or assist the stretch. I'll go over this later on in the book.

These stretches are not necessarily better than relaxed stretching. Instead I would suggest getting familiar with all these types of stretching.

I find that the active stretching techniques are often useful for getting past sticking points or plateaus, but not always. I also find that relaxed stretching can leave me feeling energized and refreshed.

Also, relaxed stretching can be quite intense. There is a tendency to want to run away from the sensation. And so relaxed stretching can be a test of fortitude. Active stretching can be easier mentally because you have something to do.

Practicing both you can get comfortable with knowing when to let go and when to exert yourself.

## Basic Guidelines.

The most basic guideline for these exercises is to move slowly and smoothly. Most exercises in this book consist of an active phase and a relaxed and/or resting phase. Work at both activating and relaxing slowly and smoothly.

In the Preparation section I go over some basic exercises with instructions on how to do a **Muscle Resisted stretch** and a **Muscle Assisted Stretch**. I also have included a **Dual Assist** section.

All of these are different ways of stretching the body and exercising it. And rather than relying on one active stretching method my intent is to help you learn two or three options so that you can use them all if time permits or focus on the one that seems appropriate if time is limited.

## Exercise Set 1



This first part could be considered a warm up or an exercise set in its own right. Note that there is no active stretching until the the hip hinging butt activation exercise. However, these first exercises are still helpful in that they can be used to increase body awareness, helping you become aware of the movement possibilities of your body.

## Wide Leg Bound Angle







Slide ribcage left and right.



Open chest and look forwards. (Straighten thoracic spine).



Lift elbows, then hands, then reach arms forwards. Keeping arms lifted: reach arms, then relax (repeat.)





**Top: Reach with one arm. Bottom: Reach with both arms.**

**Basic Set Up**, Seated with feet together but feet about a thighs length away from the pelvis. (If you were to bend forwards you face would end up between your feet.)

**Part 1:** Bend forwards with hands on the floor.

- Slide your ribcage to the right
- Return to center
- Slide your ribcage to the left.
- Repeat a few times (x5 each side) then

**Part 2:** Open chest, lift head and look forwards, lift your elbows. (If your elbows were on the floor to start with, notice the “additional weight” this adds to your ribcage) and then lift your hands. Then slowly and gradually reach your arms forwards. (This adds even more weight so do this slowly to make the transition more comfortable and so you can stop if it is too uncomfortable.

Hold and breath deeply. Optionally:

- Each inhale lengthen gradually by reaching ribs away from pelvis and reach shoulders (and arms) further forwards)
- Exhale hold the pose but relax the above actions, let your ribcage sink slightly, let your shoulders move back and down and even bend the elbows and fingers slightly.
- Repeat a few times (x5 or more) then

Slowly **sit up** keeping the arms reaching past the head.

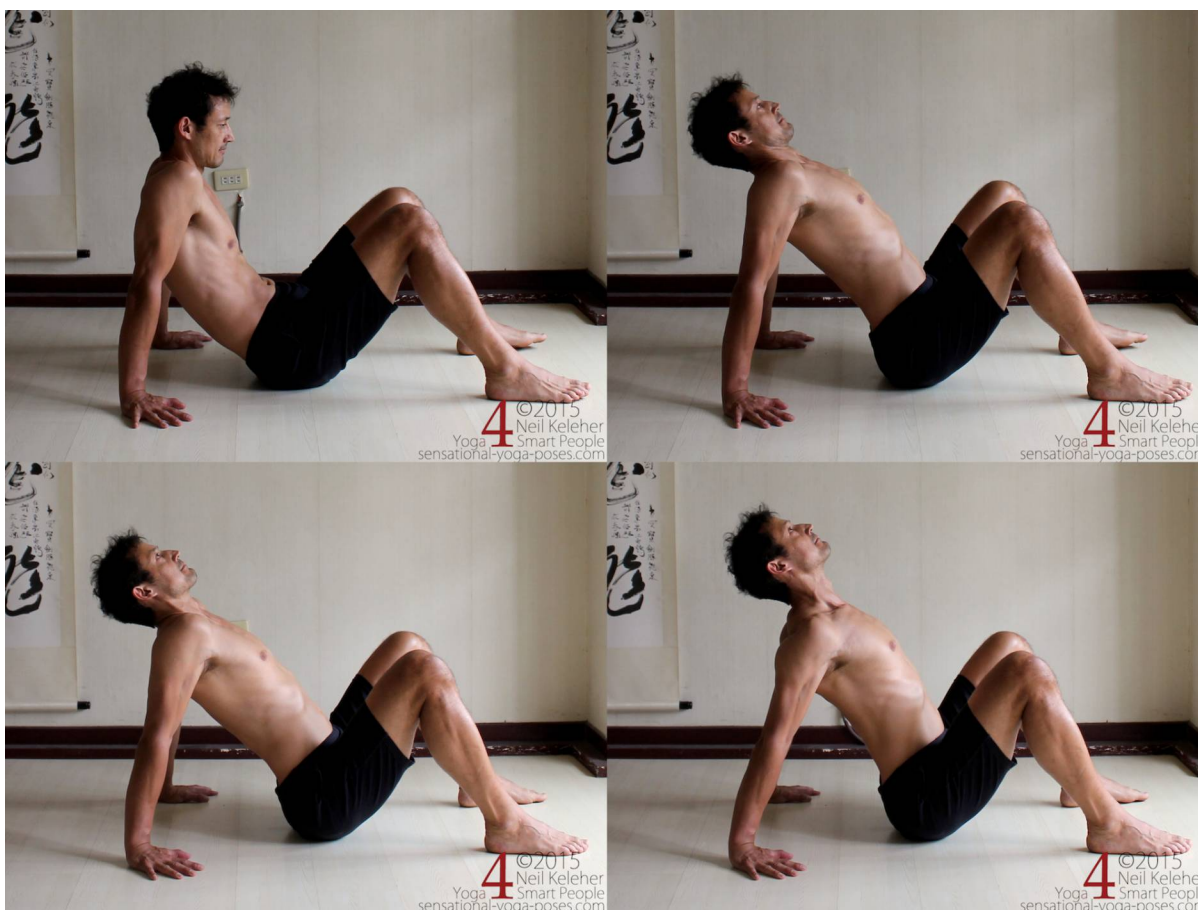
**Part 3:** Keep the arms up with elbows slightly bent.

- Reach one arm up lifting shoulder and ribs on that side and straightening the elbow.
- Relax the arm and reach with the other arm.
- Repeat a few times then reach up with both arms and hold.
- (Optionally, keep reaching the arms up and touch the palms together keeping the elbows straight.)

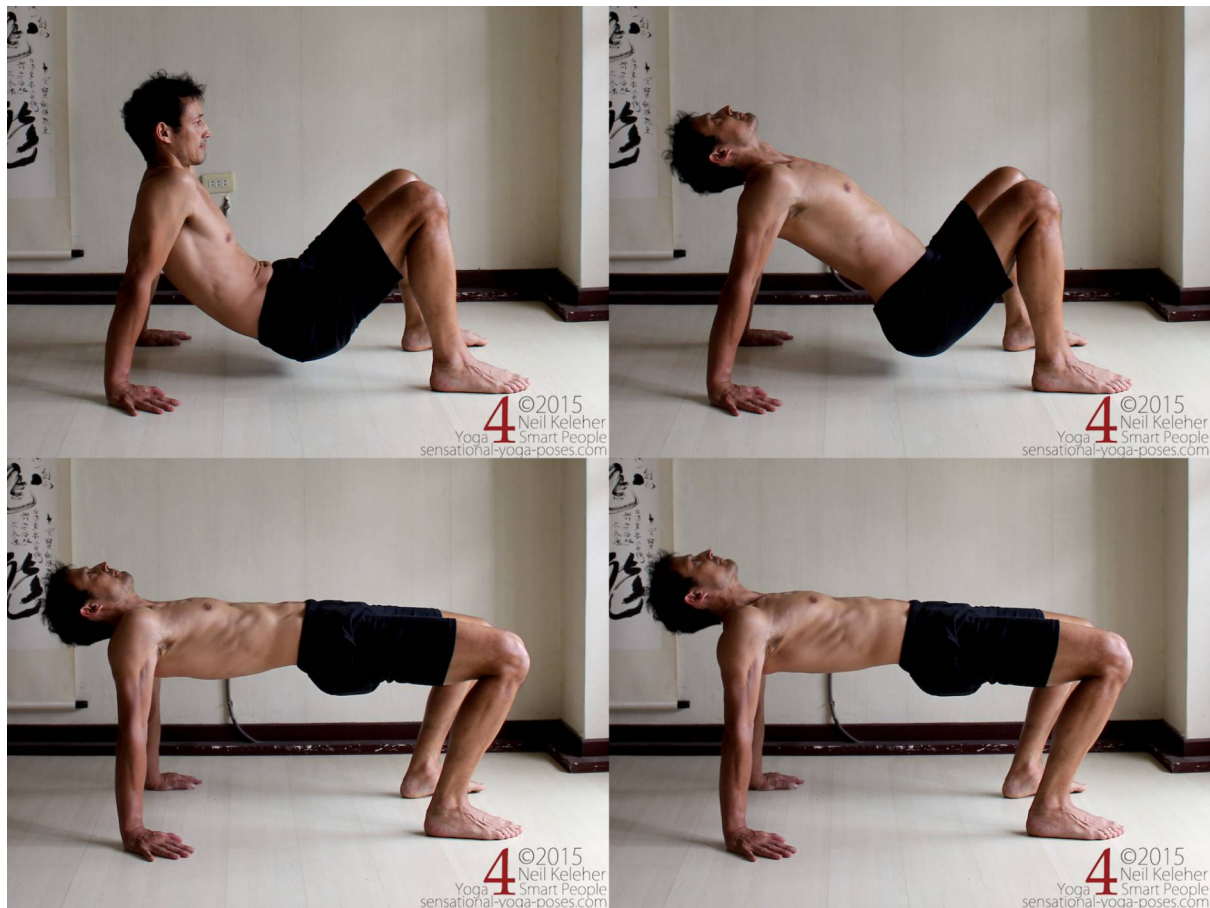
## Table Top



Lift tailbone and bend spine backwards.



Top: Bend spine backwards. Bottom: Push shoulders backwards.



**Top: Bend Spine backwards. Bottom: Lift hips and ribcage higher.**

**Basic Set up,** Seated with knees bent and pointing upwards and feet flat on the floor. Lean back and place hands on floor behind you. Point hands straight ahead but spread your fingers.

**Part 1:**

- Lift tailbone so that pelvis rolls forwards (pubic bone will move down.) Allow your lumbar spine to bend backwards (contract your lumbar spinal erectors) and bend your thoracic spine backwards also (contract your thoracic spinal erectors). Expand your ribcage at the same time.
- Then relax.
- Repeat enough times that you can recognize the feeling of bending your spine backwards. (Recognize either the contraction at the back of your body or the opening/lengthening of the front of your abdomen and ribcage. Of focus on feeling your sternum moving away from your pubic bone while backward bending the spine.)

You can do this first while sitting upright and then try it with hands on the floor behind your back.

**Part 2: Add the shoulders**

- Bend your spine backwards, then use your shoulders to lift your ribcage up, away from the floor.
- Relax both actions
- Repeat a few times.
- Rest if required then move on to the next part.

**Part 3: Add the Hips**

- Lift the hips.
- Use your legs to lift your pelvis higher.
- Bend your spine backwards
- Use your shoulders to lift your ribcage higher.
- Relax (don't drop your hips all the way down) and repeat.

Initially you may find it easier to bend your spine backwards first, then use your hips to lift your pelvis higher, then use the shoulders to lift your ribcage higher.

Another possible activation sequence is:

- Use your shoulders to lift your ribcage first.
- Then bend your spine backwards.
- Then use your legs to lift your pelvis higher.

With practice you can do all three actions simultaneously.

Stand up for the next exercise or use the following transition exercise.



## Roll to a Squat



**Reach between legs, roll on to feet.**

You can simply stand up, or you can try balancing on your sitting bones and from there roll to a squat.

**Tip:** Spread your knees and reach your arms (and torso) forwards between your legs as you try to roll on to your feet.

Then stand up from the squat.

## Standing Single Leg Hip Lift



Lift and lower left side of pelvis. Use right hip muscles.

**Basic Set Up:** Stand with feet about shoulder width apart. Feet should be parallel. You can stand with knees slightly/comfortably bent or with knees straight.

Shift weight to one leg, lift the other foot while keeping torso upright.

- Lift the unsupported-leg hip and then lower it keeping the foot lifted.
- Focus on using the hip muscles of the supporting leg.

In this exercise it can be easy to use the abs on the un-supported leg side to lift the hip. See if you can use the hip muscles of the supporting leg. To lift the opposite hip you should feel the outer hip muscles (between the crest of the pelvis and the head of the thigh bone) activating. To sink the hip gradually you could just let the hip sink down with gravity. But then work towards gradually letting the hip sink down.

A slightly more advanced action is to lift and lower the opposite hip and see if you can find a position where the tension in the supporting leg hip feels **balanced**.

## Leg Rotations

**Basic Set Up:** Stand with feet shoulder width apart and parallel and with knees straight.

- Externally rotate the thighs (so that fronts of the thighs move away from each other.)
- Relax.
- Internally rotate the thighs (so that fronts of the thighs move towards each other.)
- Relax
- Repeat a few times (5 times or more).

You can also do this exercise with knees slightly bent.

If you have trouble activating your buttocks as required in one of the later exercises, then focus on feeling your buttocks when you externally rotate your thighs (with knees straight.) What happens? Ideally you should feel your buttocks activating.

- Try to externally rotate, then relax slowly and smoothly and repeat so that you can **feel your buttocks** activating and relaxing.
- Memorize the feeling of your buttocks activating.

## Standing Standing Sitting Bone Lift



Move sitting bones back and up (ribcage stationary.)



**Move sitting bones back and up (ribcage moves with pelvis.)**

If you already have “sitting bone awareness” you can skip this exercise and move on to the next one.

**Basic Set Up:** Stand with feet shoulder width apart, feet parallel and knees slightly/comfortably bent.

**Part 1:**

- Move your sitting bones rearwards and upwards. Allow your lumbar spine to bend backwards as you do so.
- Relax and return to the starting position. Repeat a few times (x5 or more.)

**Part 2:**

- Move your sitting bones rearwards and upwards. Allow your ribcage to move forwards and downwards as you do so.
- **Ribcage and pelvis can move as one unit in this exercise.**
- Relax and return to the start.
- Repeat a few times (x3 or more.)



Prior to part 2 you can adjust the bend of your lumbar spine.

- I'd suggest first tilting the pelvis a little bit forwards and then backwards and then varying between the two positions until you can feel the position where your lumbar spine feels most comfortable.
- Try to **maintain this feeling in your lumbar spine** as you tilt your pelvis forwards and backwards.

## Standing Forward Bend



**Move sitting bones upwards. (ribcage moves with pelvis).**

For this exercise, practice lifting your sitting bones while bending forwards.

**Basic Set Up** Bend forwards with knees straight and feet shoulder width and parallel. Depending on your flexibility, rest your hands on a chair, or yoga blocks or on the floor.

- Focusing on your sitting bones, gradually lift your sitting bones
- Then relax and let your sitting bones move down.
- Repeat a few times (x5 or more).