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PART 1
UNDERSTANDING STRETCHING AND FLEXIBILITY

Would you like me to start by showing you just how flexible you currently are? If we were together, I could probably tell just by watching you walk into my office. The next best thing, however, is to let me guide you through a simple flexibility self-test. Together we’ll be able to pinpoint any problem areas you may have. Don’t worryâyou’re not going to have to change into one of those â€œopen in the backâ€ examination gowns.

Your lifestyle plays a big role in your overall flexibility, along with how you are built and your past physical history. Once we have an understanding of what’s causing your flexibility problems, I’ll explain how healthy stretching your muscles works and why you should start feeling better once we begin.
Chapter 1
Here's Looking at You, Kid—Your Flexibility Self-Test

You're not supposed to move like the Tin Man in The Wizard of Oz.

You're traveling down the Yellow Brick Road with Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Cowardly Lion and the antithesis to flexibility himself—the Tin Man. Even well oiled, he still saunters along stiffly. It's a good thing the Tin Man only asked the Wizard for a heart. Can you imagine the headaches he would have suffered being that tight if he asked for nerves instead?

Using the Tin Man example in my presentations to groups around the country really illustrates how we are not supposed to move. We don't move solidly, instead we rotate or move in circles within our joints (balls and sockets that are part of the bone structure). I'll explain all of this in Chapter 3. But right now, we need to find out about you. How do you move and how flexible are you?
This flexibility test will help identify any problem areas you might have and may turn up a few surprises. Lacking flexibility in a specific area may be coming from some other place than you might think.

If we find that you have limited flexibility in some or even all areas, don't be concerned. You're not a complete physical wreck. I'll suggest some stretches and where to find them in the Guide.

Healthy stretching is easily blended into your daily routine, since you don't need special clothing or equipment. You'll be able to identify yourself in upcoming chapters that deal with lifestyle and sports. The healthy stretches in those chapters will get you back on the road to flexibility. If you still need a little more help, Part 6 features healthy stretches for the exact area you need to work on. Even doing those doesn't take a lot of time, especially as you become more flexible.

I only stretch five minutes a day to maintain my flexibility. But, remember, I know someone in the business. So let's have some fun and get started.

**Who's Walking in Your Footsteps?**

Let's start by looking at the way you walk. Have you ever wondered who made those strange tracks in the sand or snow when you turn around? You did! In fact those very tracks provide lots of information about some problems with your flexibility. Can you find your tracks in the Photos 1-1 and 1-2?

Photo 1-1. Waddling duck.
Waddling Duck

I couldn’t have made those tracks, a duck must have waddled behind me. If the tracks in Photo 1-1 look familiar and you have a tendency to wear out the outside edges of your heels, it shows you probably have tightness in your hip joint. To confirm this, stand up and look down. Your toes should be somewhat pointed out. If both feet point out the tightness could be in both hip joints. If one foot is fairly straight while the other’s pointed out, the pointed-out side usually has the tightness.

The tracks are not caused by just aimlessly wandering down the beach or through the snow. Even if you try to straighten out your feet as you walk, it just won’t feel natural and shortly you’ll be back to the duck waddle. The tightness is most likely caused by a group of small muscles, the hip rotators, whose job description is to move your foot in and out. These muscles are located under the big muscles of your derrières. I’ll bet you thought your ankles were responsible? Wrong!

Lost Pigeon
Do your footprints in the sand look like the pigeon tracks in Photo 1-2? Do you normally walk a bit toe in? If you think your ankles are causing you to make these tracks, you're wrong. The real problem usually is a tightness in a group of muscles located in your inner thigh. Trying to walk straighter is not the answer. Healthy stretching the muscle group will improve your flexibility, naturally allowing the foot's return to a more normal position.

**You Heard What?**

"Some of the great athletes are somewhat pigeon-toed. How bad can it be?"

It's true that certain athletes (usually sprinters) may be somewhat pigeon-toed. Wide receivers in football may also fit into this category. They are superbly conditioned athletes.

Being pigeon-toed, in your case, is not an advantage, but a potential source of injuries. You may not have the strength to avoid the arch, ankle, and knee injuries that can develop.

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**Stretching Strategies**

Okay duck waddler, I have some hip joint stretches that will get you back on track in Chapter 20. One special exercise that really helps is the Pretzel.

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*Mr. Stretch Explains*

Your body might be compensating is an expression I use to help you understand how the body adjusts itself to compensate for losses in flexibility. If you notice one shoulder is lower than the other, the body may be compensating for a neck area problem, not a shoulder problem. The same is true about certain pains. Where it's hurting might not be the source of why it's hurting.
Your posture, the way you stand and sit, can also tell us quite a lot. You'll need a full-length mirror so you can evaluate your posture. Compare it with Photos 1-3 and 1-4 as I guide you along.

I've placed a line down the center of our model, Lisa, as a reference point. Don't tape your mirror at home to simulate this but I do suggest hanging a piece of rope over or in front of the mirror. Weight it at the bottom by tying on something heavy so it hangs straight down, or just visualize the line.

You've probably never used a mirror to look at yourself the way I want you to now. Normally the mirror is used for specific purposes, like shaving, makeup, doing your hair, and dressing. Now I want you to *really* look at yourself, as if I were with you, so we can both analyze what you see. Remember, it's not always what you see that's causing a loss of flexibility. *Your body might be compensating* by adjusting its position.

*The Statue of Liberty*

Look at Photo 1-3 and stand the same way in front of a mirror. Begin by trying to line yourself up so the rope, or imaginary vertical line, starts at the top of your head, hangs down though the center of your eyes, the center of your chin, and follows down through the center of your body. This straight line is a reference point to determine if your body is *symmetrical*, or balanced evenly on both sides of the line. Classic architecture is symmetrical. You've had your body for a while so it's like classic architecture, or should be.

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*If Your Posture Could Speak.*

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Leaning Tower of Pisa

Stretching Strategies
If you're leaning sideways, I suggest the neck and shoulder healthy stretches in Chapter 22. They'll help in returning your body to the more desirable, classic architectural symmetry. If the shoulders become even when you sit, the uneven shoulders were caused by a hip, so go to Chapter 20 for some hip stretches.

If your imaginary shoulder line is not forming a 'T' with the vertical line as in Photo 1-4, you may be really tight on the opposite side of your neck. For instance, if you're leaning to the right, the tightness generally is on the left side of your neck. So it's not that your right shoulder is low, the tightness may be causing your left shoulder to be high. If you're leaning to the left, the opposite may be the case. Usually it's an upper body tightness if the hips are even and the shoulders are tilted. However, if you sit down and the shoulders become even, the tightness should be in your hips.
Photo 1-5. Tilted posture.

Photo 1-6. One hip higher. Notice how Lisa is leaning to her right.
You have one hip higher than the other (Photo 1-6) if you can’t form a “T” with the imaginary and hanging lines. Let’s assume your right hip is higher. The cause is usually lower-right side back tightness. The muscle has tightened and become shorter. It can also be caused by a tilting of the pelvis (the bone structure that forms the hips). The hip flexor muscle group may be the culprit.

**How Do You Look From the Side?**

Now turn yourself sideways like Lisa in Photo 1-7, so the hanging rope lines up with your ears, shoulders and point of your hips. The question is does it line up like Photo 1-7 or are you hunched forward as in Photo 1-8?

Photo 1-7. Good posture.
You may not even be aware you’re hunched forward. Your body may have compensated with this position for so long it’s become a normal feeling. Are you aware of some sensitivity if you’re touched on the front of your chest where it meets your arm?

Knees and Ankles, the Propellers
It's not unusual to have some sort of knee and ankle problems. After all, they form the support for your body's weight and are responsible for literally propelling you along life's path. Also life's fairway, life's tennis court, and... enough, I think you've got the picture.

In some cases, injuries are caused by problems in other areas. Your body, compensating for problems in knees or ankles, can cause other problems to develop in the upper body. Some compensation! If the brain had to support the weight, maybe it would review its decisions.

**Getting a Knee Up**

You can leave the mirror and head over to a doorway as we check your knee flexibility. Let's test your left side first.

![Photo 1-9 (Left). Place the front of your left hip and left knee up against a wall or door molding.](image)

![Photo 1-10 (Middle). Reach down with your left hand as you pick up your left foot, grasping it in front of your ankle.](image)

![Photo 1-11 (Right). If you can touch your left heel to your derrière, that's good flexibility.](image)
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Repeat the test with the right knee by placing the front of the right hip and knee against the molding.

**Stretching Strategies**

Let's give those knees a chance to work and help prevent injuries. If the tests showed the tightness is more knee related use my knee stretches in Chapter 20. If your tightness made it difficult bringing your leg back in the Knee Differential test, also do the hip stretches in the same chapter.

If you feel a pull in the top of the knee to the front of your thigh as you are trying to bring the foot toward your derrière, stop. You have discovered limited flexibility. Remember how far you were able to bring it back this time. Now we have to determine if the limited flexibility is related to the knee or a group of muscles that connect with the hip. Do the differential test next. Then repeat this test with the right knee by placing the front of the right hip and knee against the molding.

**Knee Differential Test**

Let's find the cause of your limited knee flexibility. If you had to stop somewhere along the way in the previous exercise, it's time to find what's causing it, the knee or the hip.

How far you're able to move your left foot determines how good the flexibility of the hip muscle group is. If you can't move your knee six to 10 inches away from the wall, the tightness would seem more related to your hip.

Photo 1-12. Stand in the same position you started with in Photo 1-9.
Photo 1-13. Move your left foot back and away from the wall.

Ankles Away

Chris's Concerns

Never push the ankle down when you do this test. Relax it down as far as it wants to go. People injure themselves by forcing the body into positions it can't reach naturally.

You can use the lower step of a staircase, a step on your porch, or even place several wide, thick books on the floor to test the flexibility of your ankles.

The angle the lowered ankle forms tells us about your flexibility. A 45-degree angle is very good. If you can't get your heel to go past the step, don't force it because you have very limited flexibility. Now repeat this test for your other ankle.

Photo 1-14. Start by standing backward on a bottom step. Put the weight on the ball of your foot.