Achilles and Calf Stretching

Achilles tendon stretching is important for many foot and ankle patients. We feel that your specific problem is due to, or aggravated by, the calf or Achilles tightness. But these stretches are good for everyone with or without foot problems.

Treatments for tight Achilles and calf tendons include physical therapy, rest, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medicines. However, the root cause for the symptoms is tightness of the tendon which will require stretching on a consistent basis. The calf and Achilles often get tighter with age. This is due to several factors: first, decreased activities and becoming more sedentary, we also have less daily stretch of the calf tendons. Second, as we age the elasticity of the tendons decreases. Additionally, routine use of higher heeled shoes can contribute to shortened Achilles tendons.

Stretching treatments are aimed at solving the primary problem of a short calf and Achilles tendon.

Stretching is the treatment of choice and is generally successful in 85 to 90% of patients. Stretching can help in as little as 3 weeks, while others may take 6 months to break the longstanding contracture.

The stretching should be done 2-3 times a day building up to 3 minutes each session. It is advantageous to cluster the sessions together as a set taking 1 to 2 minutes break in between so that you are less likely to miss sessions throughout the day.

Use a step or stand with a wall or railing for support. An aerobic step usually works well, as it is about 8 inches tall and has a rounded edge or if performing on stairs, use the bottom stair and hold onto the railing. There are additional stretching devices and many slant board options for purchase on the Internet.

If using an aerobic step or slant board, position yourself with your back against the wall and your knee straight. Place the balls of your feet on the step while wearing tennis shoes and let your heels go down. It is okay for your toes to angle upward. You should feel a pulling or tightness in your upper calf just below the knee. Hold the stretch until slight pain is felt keeping track of how much time this takes. Stretch 30 seconds for the first session. Do 3 sessions per day, gradually increasing amount of time. You may need to stay at a certain time for a few days. As you become accustomed to that amount of time, you can increase it gradually until you reach a maximum of 3 minutes for each session. Be patient.

You may have an increase in pain somewhere between 2 and 6 weeks after beginning stretching program. This is expected and is typically minor and should not be excruciating. If you continue to do stretching program and work through the pain it typically resolves within a few weeks. As you progress through the stretching program you will have some good days and bad days and this is normal and expected. While not all patients' symptoms are relieved completely, usually a satisfactory result is obtained within 1 to 4 months. Once you have obtained satisfactory relief, we recommend that the stretching is continued forever.

Treatment schedule:

Week 1: 15 seconds 3 times a day

Week 2: 30 seconds 3 times a day

Week 3: 1 minute 3 times a day

Week 4: 1.5 minutes 3 times a day

Week 5: 2 minutes 3 times a day

Week 6: 2.5 minutes 3 times a day

Week 7+: 3 minutes 3 times a day

1. Gastroc stretch: Place the balls of your feet (in a shoe) on the edge of the stair or phonebook or step. If support is needed, use hand rails or place your hand on the wall.

Maintain a both legs in a straightened position, allow the heels to lower towards the ground. Hold this position and gradually increase along the time guidelines. Do not bounce.

2. Soleus stretch: Do the same as above, however, this time bend your knees a little