

My Top 8 Stretches to Eliminate Neck, Upper Back, and Shoulder Pain

Cervical (neck), thoracic (upper back), and shoulder pain is often caused from stiffness in the thorax. We spend so much of our day sitting slouched or standing hunched over (in a forward flexed position for the thoracic spine) that we lose normal mobility. This stiffness in the thorax can cause compensation patterns in our cervical spine and shoulders. Over time, this can develop into painful areas. *The key to eliminating pain is to improve the mobility of the thoracic spine, so the neck and shoulders no longer have to compensate for the lack of mobility.* The following stretches are designed to counteract the stresses and postures of daily life and to restore the normal mobility to the upper back.

I prefer to use a foam roller (as shown below), but you could utilize several rolled up towels as well or possibly a water noodle with or without towels rolled around it. The key is to have a fairly firm surface which you can lay on that will not impede shoulder mobility. A variation of the foam roll stretches could also be to lie over a large theraball, known as a Swiss ball or exercise ball, and perform the same arm positions.

When performing these exercises, it is important to understand that stretching should never be painful. You should feel a mild to moderate stretching sensation. If you start to experience numbness or tingling in the hands or arms, you should discontinue the stretch at that time.

Position 1

Keep your knees bent and your arms at your side. Hold the position for 30 – 60 seconds.



Position 2

Keep your knees bent and your arms out to the side in a cross or “T” position. Hold the position for 30 – 60 seconds.



Position 3

Keep your knees bent. Hold your arms so they have a 90 degree angle at the shoulder and at the elbow in a “goal post” position. Hold the position for 30 – 60 seconds.



Transition Position

Bring your hands together in a “prayer” position. This allows your shoulder blades to set, so they don’t get caught on the foam roll as you bring your arms straight overhead.



Position 4

Keep your knees bent as you reach your arms overhead. Hold the position for 30 – 60 seconds.

Repeat the routine twice, at least 1 – 2 times per day as needed.



Thoracic Extension Mobilization

Position the foam roll or towel roll perpendicular across your thoracic spine. Try to position it in the “tightest” area. Using your hands behind your head **for support only**, try to extend your thorax backward over the foam roll. Try to keep your pelvis rolled under and your back flat toward the floor. This will allow for a greater stretch in the thoracic area. Gently oscillate in this tight area 20-40 times depending on how it feels. If you get increasing pain, stop.

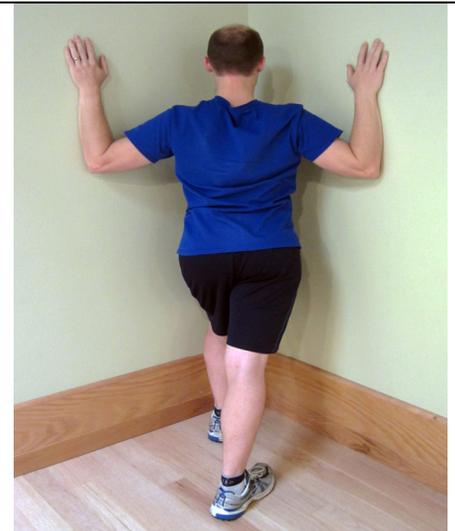


Standing Doorway or Corner Stretches

Corner Stretch 1

Stand in a doorway or in a corner with your arms stretched out slightly less than 90 degrees at the shoulder. Step one leg through and gently lunge forward to stretch the front of the chest. Be sure to keep your shoulder blades in a back and down position. Make sure you do not stick your head forward, but that you keep your chin retracted back to keep good posture and alignment.

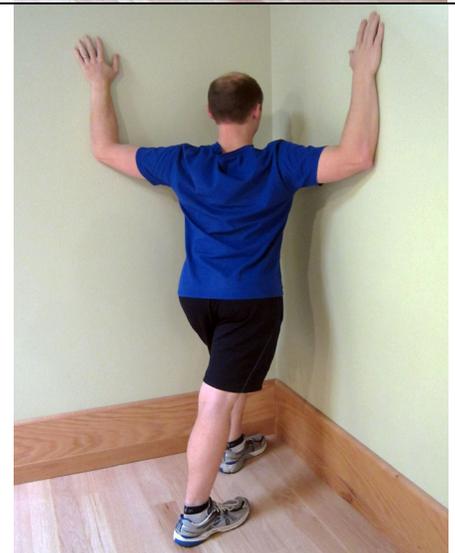
Hold for 15 seconds, and repeat three times.



Corner Stretch 2

Stand in a doorway or in a corner with your arms in a “goal post” position at 90 degrees at the shoulder. Step one leg through and gently lunge forward stretching the front of the chest. Be sure to keep your shoulder blades in a back and down position. Make sure you do not stick your head forward, but that you keep your chin retracted back to keep good posture and alignment.

Hold for 15 seconds, and repeat three times.



Corner Stretch 3

Stand in a doorway or in a corner with your arms slightly higher than 90 degrees at the shoulder. Step one leg through and gently lunge forward stretching the front of the chest. Be sure to keep your shoulder blades in a back and down position. Make sure you do not stick your head forward, but that you keep your chin retracted back to keep good posture and alignment.

Hold for 15 seconds, and repeat three times.

