

Time to consider yourself?

Quick and simple exercises for carers



Introduction

by John Molyneux, Molyfit instructor

When you are caring for someone else, it may be the last thing on your mind to consider yourself. You may struggle to find any time for self-care, but you will be a better and stronger carer if you do.

I was approached by Hertfordshire County Council to come up with a way of instructing unpaid carers in how they can stop hurting themselves when lifting or moving a loved one. The secret is, if you can spend a little time looking after yourself, your body will be in a better condition and have more resilience for whatever challenges you may face.

Before we begin, may I just take the time to thank you and offer my appreciation for the fantastic work that you are doing. You are the forgotten heroes and the backbone of our healthcare system. I understand that every carer's situation is unique, but the common thread is that you allow your own health to suffer to give every part of yourself to care for another. Your time is limited and precious, you are drained and running on fuel reserves, but please take a moment to consider the **one exercise a day** that I am setting for you to help keep you going and to help prevent any future injuries.

The exercise plan

For your muscles to function as they should and not cause you discomfort or pain, they need to be strong, well balanced and loose.

The main issue you will come across will be tight and stressed muscles that cause imbalances in your body, which then lead to pain. You need to maintain a degree of fitness and strength to stop the tension from occurring and allow you to continue caring for your loved one without hurting yourself.

All I ask is that you **do a warm-up exercise** to loosen the muscles and get the blood flowing, **followed by a stretch** to keep your muscles working in the way you need them to. These daily exercises will take **no longer than a minute to do**. It doesn't matter when you do them, just try to make them part of your daily routine.

There are seven different exercises for you to do, one a day. These are mainly stretch-based exercises. To get the most out of the stretches, I suggest you warm the muscles up first. The best exercise for this is **sit to stand**. It will strengthen your back, thighs and core muscles, giving your body the strength and resilience it needs. Try doing this exercise first, five times, before the daily stretch.

Sit to stand warm-up

Use the following technique to stand from a sitting position in a way that will strengthen your muscles instead of weakening them.

- ▶ Sit on the chair with your core on and a neutral spine.
- ▶ Place your feet at hip distance apart, toes slightly facing out.
- ▶ Take in a breath.
- ▶ With relaxed shoulders and an open chest, breathe out and push up using your thighs, buttocks and core muscles.

Things to avoid when standing from seated



1



2



3

- ▶ Avoid bending forward and placing your hands on your knees. (1)
- ▶ Try to stand up with a neutral spine, keeping your bodyweight out of your back and instead using your bottom, thighs and core.
- ▶ Avoid bringing your knees together. (2)
- ▶ Keep your knees apart.
- ▶ Your knee should be over your foot
- ▶ Try to avoid standing using your back. (3)
- ▶ Keep your spine neutral and don't lean forward.

Through this exercise you have strengthened your core, thighs, buttocks, back and hips, as well as your body in general. Before learning this technique, you were at risk of weakening your body and causing imbalances through habit.

Day 1. Legs down to one side

This is a gentle exercise that will loosen your spine and work on your trunk mobility. It can be done on the floor or the bed.



- ▶ Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor. Make sure your feet are a little distance apart, not touching.
- ▶ With your arms straight, slightly away from your body, pin your shoulders to the floor. If your shoulders rise when you do this exercise you will not feel the benefit of the stretch in your back.
- ▶ Gently and slowly, with your legs going in the same direction, let your knees fall down to one side.
- ▶ When your legs are down as far as they can go, hold the stretch for 30 seconds, then repeat on the other side.

Remember to anchor your body with your arms and shoulders, trying to keep them on the floor. Don't force the stretch; let your legs fall down naturally.

Day 2. The door hinge

This is a great all-rounder and will really give you an idea of what is tight in your body and needs your attention. The door hinge is one of my favourite exercises. For this exercise you will need a pillow.



- ▶ Lie on your side with your knees bent and your head on the pillow for support. Place your arms straight out in front of you, palms together.
- ▶ Now, with your legs pressed together and fixed on the floor, but allowing your top half to twist round, move your top arm up and over, all the way to the floor behind you (or as far as you can comfortably reach). As you do so, let your eyes follow your fingertips. Do the action slowly and with control. If you rush, you may pull that tight muscle that has been hiding.
- ▶ As soon as the back of your hand hits the floor (or reaches your comfort point), take a breath and bring your arm back to the starting position.

Do this 10 times on each side. If you are struggling to reach the floor, don't push too hard. Just try to go a little further each time. You should be able to reach the floor by the tenth time.

Day 3. The cat stretch

- ▶ Gently get down onto the floor on your hands and knees.
- ▶ With your arms and legs parallel, an equal distance apart, pull your belly in and slowly round up through your spine, lower back, shoulders and neck, arching your spine towards the ceiling.
- ▶ Gently let your head drop. Hold this stretch for 30 seconds, and remember to breathe.



The main area you should feel this in is your back. As you arch up you should feel the muscles pulling either side of your spine.

Day 4. The glute stretch

As these muscles are so powerful, the last thing you want to do is go in too hard, cause a spasm and make your muscles tighter. Let's start with a light stretch.



- ▶ Lie on your back with your knees bent, feet flat on the floor.
- ▶ Let your head and shoulders rest on the floor to anchor your body. If this is uncomfortable to do and you find yourself putting a strain on your neck, place a pillow under your head for support.

- ▶ Now place your right ankle on your left knee. Use your left hand to keep your ankle in position and, with your right hand on the outside of your right knee, gently pull your knee across your body.
- ▶ Don't force the movement, and try to keep the rest of your body relaxed with a neutral spine.
- ▶ Hold this stretch for 20 seconds and feel it in the centre of your buttock.

Where can you feel the stretch? Is it a stretch or is it actually painful? Can you feel it where you are supposed to or are you feeling it elsewhere? How far did your knee travel?

If it felt ok and there was good movement, repeat on the other side.

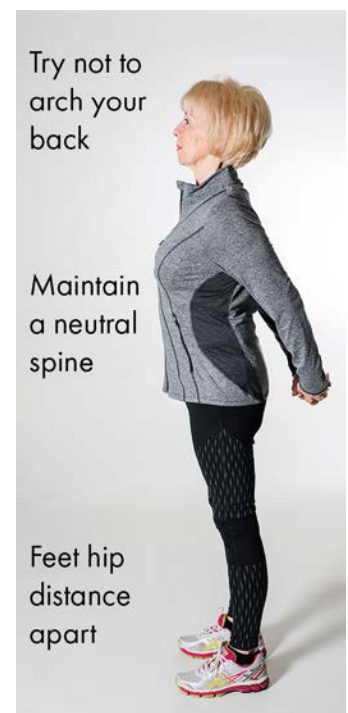
Day 5. The chest stretch

A tight chest will pull your shoulders forward, put pressure on your neck and back and make it really difficult to maintain your core. The pectoral muscles in your chest are strong and very powerful. To give you an idea of their strength, they can be trained to lift your own body weight!

Pretty much everybody has tight chest muscles, so they really need looking after to work well. When tight, they contribute to bad posture and can restrict your breathing. The pecs attach to your rib cage, so if they are tight, your ribs can't expand to their full potential, limiting the amount of air going into your lungs in deep breathing.

Let's start loosening off those pecs.

- ▶ Stand tall with a neutral spine and your feet hip distance apart.
- ▶ Open your chest and relax your shoulders. Activate your core.
- ▶ With straight arms, interlock your fingers behind you. Push your arms up while pulling your shoulder blades together.
- ▶ Stop and hold the stretch when you feel your chest opening and your arms won't go up any further.
- ▶ Hold for 20 seconds, taking in big breaths. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Keep looking forward, trying not to bend your neck.



Day 6. The hamstring stretch



- ▶ Lie on your back, feet flat on the floor with your knees bent.
- ▶ Maintaining a neutral spine, lower your right leg so it's flat on the floor. Keep your core muscles activated and breathe in.
- ▶ As you exhale, gently raise your right leg off the floor to a position that feels natural. Don't force it, and try to keep the rest of your body relaxed.
- ▶ Hold the stretch for 20 to 30 seconds and feel the muscles easing off.
- ▶ Repeat with the other leg.

The most important thing to remember is that the leg not being stretched stays at 45 degrees bent at the knee. Tight hamstrings have a direct impact on your back so, if done incorrectly, this stretch can hinder as much as it can help. Lying down with both legs out straight will arch your back and take away your neutral spine. If your hamstrings are particularly tight and you try to stretch without a bent knee on the supporting leg, it's all too easy to pull or even tear a muscle, causing quite a lot of damage.

If done gently and slowly, paying attention to what your body is telling you, and easing into your tight muscles, this stretch will have a dramatic effect on your body. Looser hamstrings will help you to bend over, taking the strain off your lower back and glutes.

Providing this stretch is done with a neutral spine, is not forced and is taken gently, it's a good indicator of what condition your hamstrings are in. A good stretch is being able to take your leg straight up with ease so it sits vertically from the floor. Keep working on it until you are comfortable and stretching feels natural.

Day 7. Gluteus medius stretch

This is the stretch that will stop your back from aching after transferring and lifting your loved one.

Avoid this stretch if you have had a hip replacement and refer to your post-operation exercises.

This is the best stretch to target the gluteus medius as it doesn't put pressure on your spine. If your body allows it, you will feel the stretch radiating from your bottom into your lower back. However, for this stretch to be beneficial, everything else has to be working correctly. Quite often, the muscles in the legs, back and bottom are too tight and can inhibit this stretch. Wear and tear in the hip also restricts this stretch. If that's the case you will feel it in your groin, not where you are meant to.



- ▶ Lie on your back with your left leg straight. Lift your right foot across your left leg and place it on the outside of your left knee, with the sole of your right foot pointing towards your body, not flat on the floor.
- ▶ Gently anchor your body with your right shoulder and place your left hand on your right knee.
- ▶ Gently pull your right knee to the floor, not too hard, turning your pelvis. As soon as you feel a stretch, stop and hold for 20 seconds.
- ▶ Repeat on the other side.

Your knee should never touch the floor. It doesn't have to move much to get the stretch. If you try too hard there is a good chance of setting off another muscle somewhere else, causing an unwanted spasm. Less is more with this one!

Keep going

For exercise to be beneficial, it needs to be consistent. Please try to keep up with these stretches and you will feel the benefits.

This is a joint project of Molyfit (me), Carers in Hertfordshire, Hertfordshire County Council and Herts Sports and Physical Activity Partnership. When you feel like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders and you are feeling alone, remember that there is support available for you.

For further advice please visit my website molyfit.co.uk

Or visit the Carers in Hertfordshire website carersinherts.org.uk

Take care and take time to consider yourself.

www.molyfit.co.uk

