

Stretching – the Truth

Prevent muscle tears and keep your joints happy by improving your flexibility in four simple moves. All it takes is four simple stretches.

BY CHRIS CANDER | PHOTOGRAPHY ROBERT REIFF

If you are unable to do the splits, there is likely only one thing standing in your way: your mind. Pavel Tsatsouline, a fitness instructor and author who holds a master of sports certification from the former Soviet government, says, “no muscles run from one leg to the other. No tendons, no ligaments; nothing but skin.” Nothing should prevent you from extending both legs out at the same time, assuming you are able to do one at a time. So why can’t you? It’s a trick of your nervous system. When you put your body into a strange position, your nervous system tells your muscles to tighten up and resist lengthening. This defensive reflex is designed to protect your connective tissues. You simply must learn the skills to override it. **TIP: Stretch not only your muscles, but your mind.**

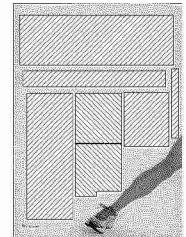
“Imagine that your muscle is a telescopic antenna. You could brutalize the outer pipe by ‘stretching’ it, or you could let the inner pipes effortlessly slide out through what I call relaxed stretching,” Tsatsouline says. “It’s not necessary to actually stretch the muscles, or make structural changes to the tissues. You relax the muscle so it displays its full length.” During a recent three-hour seminar, Tsatsouline helped students who were a few inches from completing a split

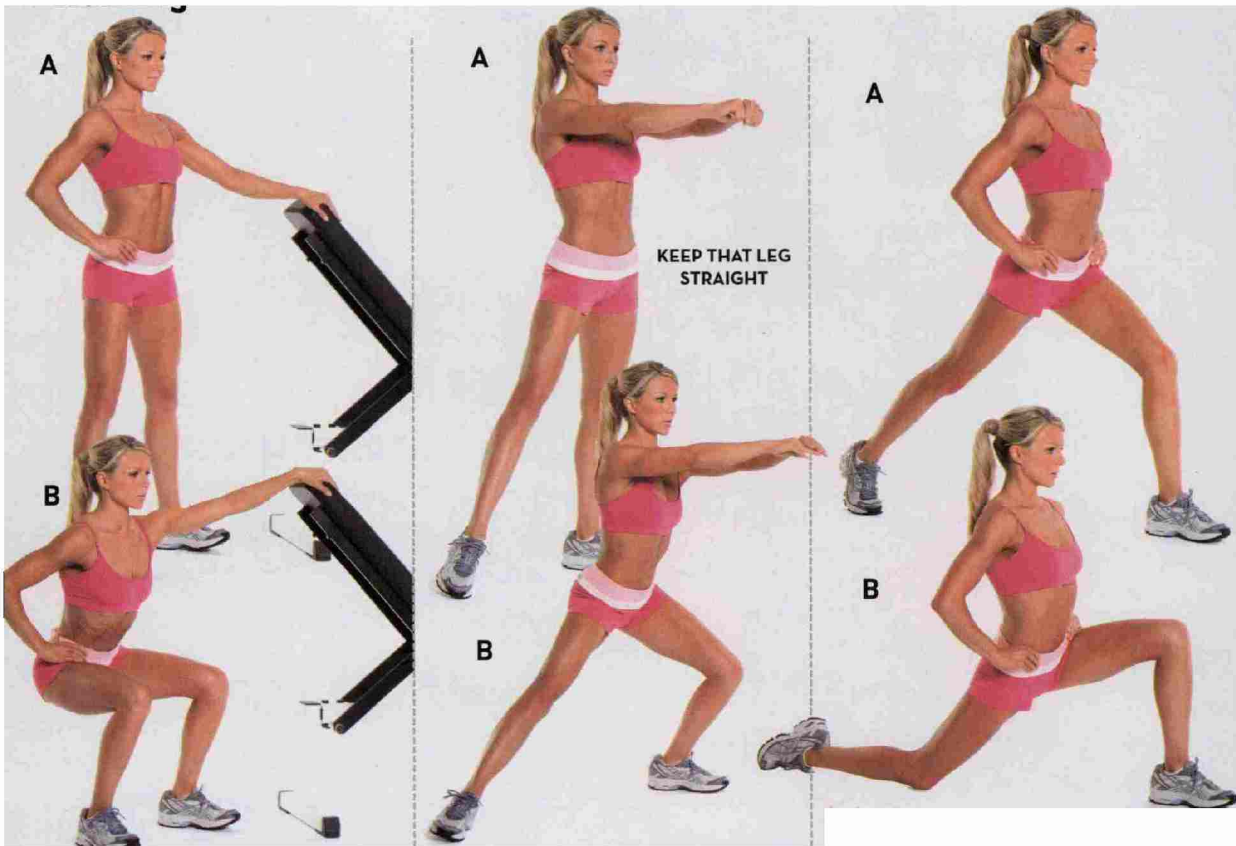
to achieve it completely by overcoming the stretch reflex. “They could not have achieved structural changes of this magnitude in this time frame. It was purely mental.” **TIP: Instead of making yourself become flexible, let yourself become flexible.**

To do a relaxed stretch, get into a position where the muscle is tense, and then simply wait for the stretch reflex to subside. Once it’s relaxed, sink deeper into the position, allowing the muscle to extend. This will feel uncomfortable, but shouldn’t be painful. Says Tsatsouline, “you’ve seen people who force themselves into a hamstring stretch and hold it for 10 seconds, or bounce up and down. That’s not long enough to overcome the stretch reflex, and it actually reinforces the reflex by making your muscles tighten up even more the next time you try it.” Improper technique could stretch the connective tissues (ligaments and tendons) instead, which may result in joint instability. **TIP: Don’t force the stretch; force the relaxation that will allow the muscles to lengthen.**

Fitness competitors and gymnasts need more flexibility than most athletes, but everyone should have some flexibility reserve beyond the demands of their sport or lifestyle to help prevent muscle tears and maintain joint health. Tsatsouline says that women should focus on their hamstrings and hip flexors, and do everything else according to individual needs. The following five moves can be done after (never before) a workout. “But if you work out daily, then don’t stretch hard every time,” he says.

HAIR & MAKEUP ALISON REYNOLDS STYLING BY JULIA PERRY CLOTHING BY ELISABETTA ROGIAN





full squat

Developing the strength and flexibility required to perform this stretch is essential for maintaining optimal lower body mobility and knee joint health. Begin with your feet shoulder-width apart, and your back and neck straight. Shift your weight onto your heels, and push your tush back, as though you were going to sit into a chair. Lower your body as far as you can go without shifting your weight onto your toes. "Always keep your knees and toes pointed in the same direction, and never toward each other," says Tsatsouline. If you have iffy knees or weak legs, hold onto a doorway as you squat. Exaggeratedly shift your weight to your heels such that if you let go of the door you would not be able to maintain your balance. As you develop, deepen the range of motion. Once you are able to perform a full squat, you should easily be able to sit on your haunches unsupported for minutes at a time.

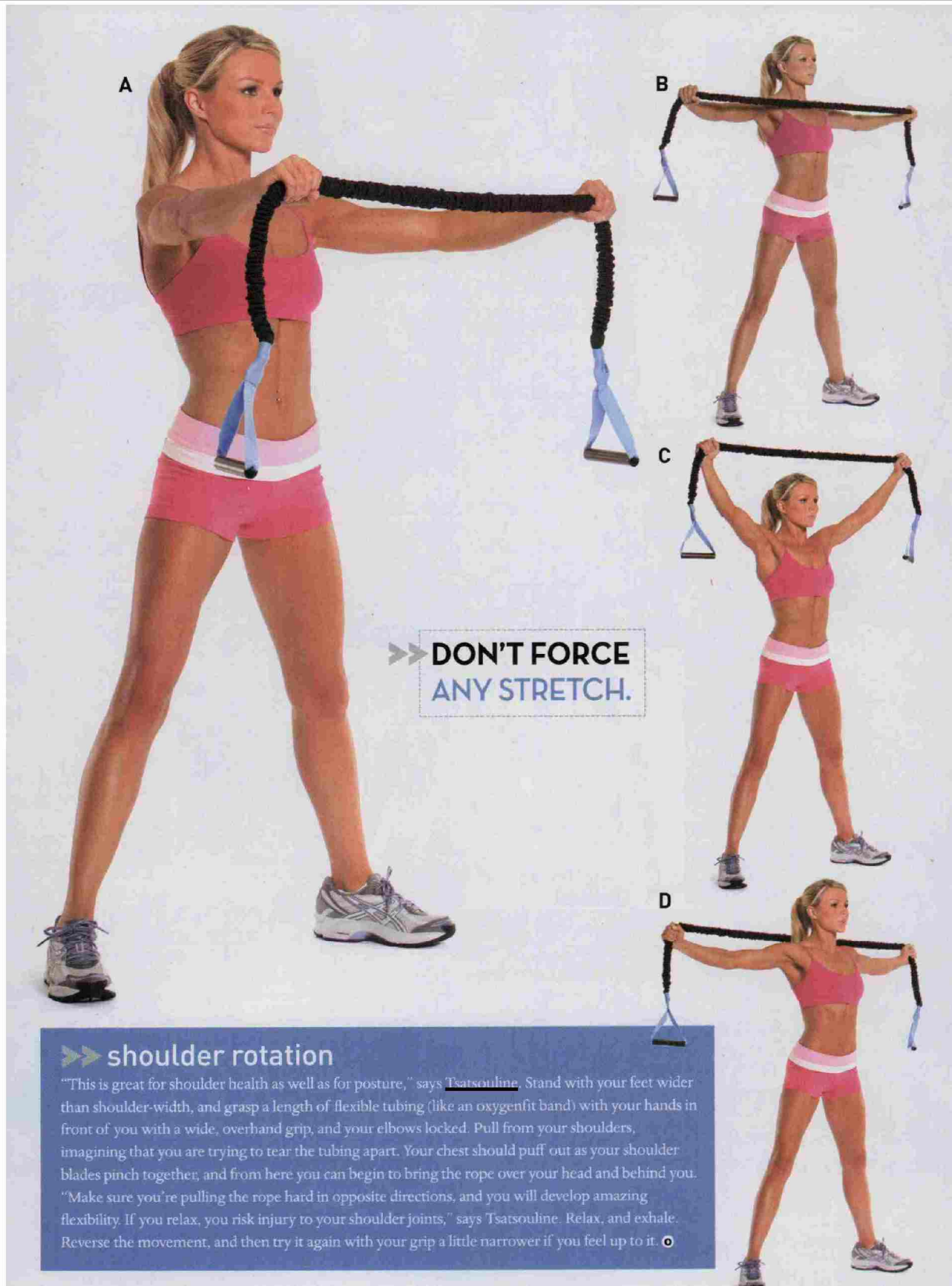
kneeling hip flexor stretch

"Tight hip flexors cause bad backs, sagging stomachs and butts, and athletic mediocrity," says Tsatsouline. "Flexible hip flexors, however, can dramatically improve your appearance by flattening your abs and tucking the glutes in." Step into a very deep lunge with your left foot, and allow your right knee and foot to rest on the floor behind you. Keep your torso and the left shin upright and your hips squared throughout the stretch. Contract your abdominals to

protect your back, and contract the hip flexors – the muscles on the front of the kneeling leg – by imagining that you are going to kick forward with that foot. Release the tension and allow yourself to sag forward. Don't allow yourself to lean forward, twist or rest on your front knee. You can keep yourself in the correct position by looking straight ahead, as your body tends to follow your head. Exhale and relax. Slowly return to the starting position and repeat on the opposite leg.

the cossack

This stretch will help loosen up your hips and improve your squatting ability. It can be challenging, however, because you must keep your knees aligned with your toes, and never buckled inward. Squat down with one foot flat on the floor and the other leg extended out to the side. "Make sure that the straight leg is really straight, not just sort of straight and the heel of your bent leg is planted," says Tsatsouline. Squeeze your glutes, then relax and let yourself go down as deep as you can. Release and sink even deeper. Repeat on the other leg. "Switch your position after each contraction to work every angle of your hip joint range of motion," he says. "Shift the weight on your support foot from heel to toes and back, vary the distribution of weight between feet, change the direction of where your unloaded foot is pointing." To prevent knee joint injury, support yourself with your hands on the floor until you can do this drill unsupported.



»» DON'T FORCE ANY STRETCH.

»» **shoulder rotation**

“This is great for shoulder health as well as for posture,” says Tsatsouline. Stand with your feet wider than shoulder-width, and grasp a length of flexible tubing (like an oxygenfit band) with your hands in front of you with a wide, overhand grip, and your elbows locked. Pull from your shoulders, imagining that you are trying to tear the tubing apart. Your chest should puff out as your shoulder blades pinch together, and from here you can begin to bring the rope over your head and behind you. “Make sure you’re pulling the rope hard in opposite directions, and you will develop amazing flexibility. If you relax, you risk injury to your shoulder joints,” says Tsatsouline. Relax, and exhale. Reverse the movement, and then try it again with your grip a little narrower if you feel up to it. ●



Training OXY

»» **STRETCH NOT ONLY YOUR MUSCLES, BUT YOUR MIND.**

»» **INSTEAD OF MAKING YOURSELF BECOME FLEXIBLE, LET YOURSELF BECOME FLEXIBLE.**



From Russia with Tough Love

Pavel Tsatsouline has trained Soviet commandos to do the splits in three to six months – “whether they liked it or not.” In Russia, he says, flexibility training is simply a part of strength training, but elsewhere it must be taught. All of Tsatsouline’s extensive experience in teaching inflexible people how to become flexible can be summarized in two main points:

Relax. Get into a stretch and stay there until the muscles relax, and allow your muscles to extend.

Breathe. Visualize breathing into and through the muscle until it relaxes. It’s a powerful technique.