

# Upper-Body Flexibility For Pain-Free Practice

By Joshua Morton, LMT

TIME TO READ: 6 MIN

**A**s professional massage therapists, we know how important it is to keep our bodies healthy and strong. We've learned about proper body mechanics, the importance of good posture and breathing.



PHOTOS BY SUSAN GUTZERT

**Rotation:** Sit straight and rotate your torso to the right. Use your left hand on your right thigh to gently assist the stretch at the end of the movement. Release and repeat two sets of 10 reps. This stretch will help create a pumping action in the discs to rehydrate them. This stretch is preferably done in a chair that is deep enough so that your calves are against the edge of the chair, in order to minimize any compensation that may occur in the pelvis while doing the exercise.

An Active Isolated Stretching (AIS) routine remains the mainstay of both my practice and self-care despite learning a great many other techniques over the years. It is still my best and favorite tool for addressing the majority of soft-tissue injuries I find in my clients and in my own body.

What I particularly like about self-care with AIS techniques is how I can do them anytime during the day and how I can incorporate a stretching routine into my busy schedule.

## A Stretching Routine to Get Out of Pain

I was 28 when I met Aaron Mattes, the developer of AIS. He completely changed my whole approach to therapy and self-care. Now, at 45, I am mostly pain-free and suffer little more than stiffness and aches if I fail to keep up on my discipline of self-care.

I have a history of lower back pain going back to when I was 16 years old. By steadily using AIS techniques for self-care, my intermittent bouts of back and hip pain are almost a faded memory. When they do occur, I am able to work myself out of the pain quickly.

In fact, I have personally found that unless I suffer an accident or injury, or allow too much time to lapse between my own stretching routines, it takes very little regular effort on my part to maintain this condition.

In a nutshell, AIS uses active muscle contractions and repeated, rhythmic movements that avoid triggering a rebound contraction in the tissues you are trying to stretch. In this section I will address some of the benefits of this stretching technique for self-care and how to successfully incorporate it into your day.

Because I live on an island, to get to my office I have to take a ferry. Waiting in line or while crossing on the ferry gives me an opportunity to do some gentle stretching movements for my neck, back, wrists and hands. I like the active component of AIS. I feel both relaxed and energized after doing some stretches.

Of course, everyone has their particular preference for creating more flexibility and strength, but I want to emphasize how important it is to stay mobile — not only in order to give our clients good care but also to enable us to be active in our chosen profession for many years.

## Be Gentle, Pay Attention

When practicing AIS it is important to be very gentle and aware of what you're experiencing from the very beginning. If a particular stretch is done too vigorously, we may be sore afterward.

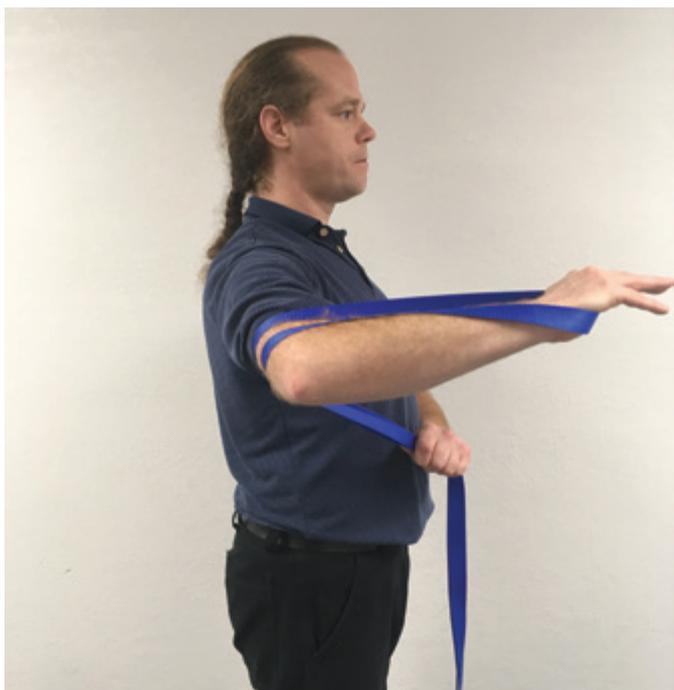
Pay attention to what you feel as you go into the end point of a stretch. Do you feel a buildup of tension? Is there any pain in doing the stretch? The tension may be a signal that the myotatic stretch reflex has kicked in and the muscle has received a signal to contract to protect itself and the joint it crosses from injury. (Stretching a muscle beyond its neurological barriers may result in increased splinting or tearing of the tissues via engagement of the myotatic reflex.)



**Lateral flexion:** Sitting straight in a chair with your arms at your side, gently bend your torso to the right. When you do this stretch, be certain you are starting at the top of your spine, moving vertebra by vertebra. You will likely feel this stretch in your lower back, in particular in the quadratus lumborum. After practicing this stretch for one set, repeat it; but this time reach your arm over your head as you bend sideways. This will add the lateral line of fascia to the stretch, giving you an excellent release in the *latissimus dorsi*.



**Horizontal abduction:** Wrap your strap around your right hand. Pull the loose ends behind your neck and hold them in your left hand. Straighten your right arm and reach back as you gently pull the rope with your left hand. As you get toward the end of the stretch, very gently extend your wrist and fingers. Release and repeat two sets of 10 reps. This stretch will help relax the front of your shoulders as well as the neural pathways leading into your fingers. This is exceptionally important if you are suffering from any tingling sensations in your arm or hands.



**External rotation:** Abduct your shoulder away from your side, slightly below horizontal. Bend your right elbow to 95 degrees. Wrap your strap around your right hand; let your strap fall around the back of your humerus and grab it with your left hand. Rotate your humerus externally; gently assist by pulling forward with your left hand. Release and repeat two sets of 10 reps. This stretch will help to de-rotate your shoulders, setting your shoulder blades down and back.

Holding a stretch increases tension as the body struggles to adjust to the decreased circulation and triggers another protective mechanism initiated by the Golgi tendon organs. These proprioceptors located in tendons are also sensitive to changes in tension. They do the opposite of the spindle cells. The Golgi tendon organs inhibit the muscle; they do not relax it.

### Inhibited vs. Relaxed Muscles

It is important to understand the difference between an inhibited muscle and a relaxed muscle. An inhibited muscle will be less able to respond to the demands you place upon it, leaving you more prone to injury. A relaxed muscle, on the other hand, will leave your muscles ready for action.

When doing AIS, I recommend avoiding tension or stress and being as relaxed as possible. Increases in range of motion may come quickly or may be gradual depending on the individual.

Do the exercises described in this article in front of a mirror if possible, so you can observe your form. Focus on precise movements. AIS uses a non-stretchy strap or hand to assist the stretch. Repeat two sets of 10 reps on each side. With regular practice you will notice your flexibility increase steadily. Try these stretches for three weeks. They are easy enough and will not take much out of your day.

As a massage therapist, it's not always easy to maintain good form when providing care. Typical concerns are shoulder, neck, low back, wrist and hand pain. These stretches done throughout the day, even between sessions, can help counteract the effects of gravity and your work so you can continue to perform in your profession for many years without pain or disability. 

Joshua Morton, LMT, MAISS, MMLT, is a 1994 graduate of Seattle Massage School. In 2002 he met Aaron Mattes and has devoted his practice to AIS since. Morton has been an international educator for 20 years and teaches at AIS Northwest (aisnorthwest.com). He has authored a guide to assisted stretching and self-stretching. His practice is located in Tacoma, Washington. Susan Guttzeit, LMT, MAISS, contributed to this article. She received her massage practitioner license in 1996 upon graduation from the Pacific Center for Awareness & Bodywork on the Hawaiian island of Kauai.

Read "Lower-Body Flexibility for Pain-Free Practice," by Joshua Morton, for a more in-depth discussion of how AIS benefits muscles and joints, at [massagemag.com/current-issue](http://massagemag.com/current-issue).

## Exclusive Online Special!

**MASSAGE Magazine**  
Only **\$1.25**  
PER ISSUE



> [CLICK HERE](#) <

For Expedited  
Service



[www.massagemag.com/subscribe](http://www.massagemag.com/subscribe)