

This Month's Focus: Hamstrings

If you have any students who are not very flexible and stretching their hamstrings strains their lower backs, have them sit on a folded, towel, blanket, or yoga mat to relieve the pressure while stretching.

1. Cat-Cow and Downward Dog Stretches. Students begin on their hands and knees. Breathe in and arch the back; breathe out and contract the back. Repeat for a total of 8 sets. Movement should be fluid and focus on moving through each vertebra. Next, students push up into downward dog. They may begin with their knees bent, if needed. Their focus should be on reaching long through the arms and the spine. For those who are less flexible, they can “walk” through their feet, straightening one leg at a time until they are able to straighten both legs at once.

When we focus on the hamstrings, it is important that we also make sure the backs are properly stretched so as not to place any strain on them. We'll do this by starting our hamstring stretches and strengthening exercises with cat-cow and downward dog.

2. Glute Stretch. Have students lie on their backs with their knees bent and feet on the floor. Take one foot and place it, flexed to protect the knee, and place it over the opposite knee. Pull the legs toward the body to stretch the glute. Hold for approximately 20 seconds. Then repeat, stretching the other side.

In the remaining exercises, we will be stretching the hamstrings in both parallel and turned-out positions. This stretch will help students with the turned-out hamstring stretches. This is also a great stretch for any ballet dancer to do, as ballet dancers tend to use their glutes frequently when turned out, often leaving them tight.

3. Seated Forward Bend. Students should sit with both legs stretched in front of them. Bend one knee so it is in a butterfly position and the foot next to the knee of the opposite leg. Stretch forward and hold for about 20 seconds. Repeat with the opposite leg bent. Repeat with both legs stretched.

4. Isometric Hamstring Stretch. Students should begin lying on their backs. For those who are less flexible, they may bend their bottom leg and also use a strap to hold their stretched leg. Bring one leg into the chest, bent with the knee to the chest. Extend the leg, holding it to pull it toward you to stretch.

“Pliés”: Bend the leg and flex the foot. Straighten the leg and point the foot to stretch it. Repeat for a total of 4 sets.

Isometric Stretching: Hold your extended leg with your hands or a strap. Breathe out as you push your leg against your hands or the strap for about 8 counts. Release the resistance, pulling your leg

slightly closer to you, and breathe in for about 8 counts. Repeat. Repeat a third time, this time holding the “release” for about 24 counts and taking deep breaths. Repeat all on the other side.

5. Isometric Hamstring Stretch (Turned Out). Repeat the previous stretch sequence, but with the extended leg slightly turned out.

Isometric stretching is a type of stretching that uses resistance to strengthen and stretch the muscles. It is one of the most effective ways to increase flexibility. It is more effective than either passive or active stretching alone.