

---

## INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS

# Stretch and relax

---

When we are stressed, our muscles can tense up without us realising. Tension headaches or muscle aches in different parts of the body can occur as a result. This is a normal response to stress (part of the “fight or flight” reaction) and is not harmful, but it can lead to temporary discomfort or pain in many different muscle groups.

Most people find it difficult to relax, or have forgotten how it feels to be fully relaxed. Relaxation is a skill which requires practice. Practising stretching and relaxing our muscles can be very useful. It helps us to notice when we are beginning to tense up (get stressed) and teaches us how to do something about it (relax our muscles). The exercise below is an example of progressive muscular relaxation. With practice, you can become skilled at recognising the difference between tense and relaxed muscles and feel confident in taking steps to relax yourself. You can also use this exercise to prevent tension building in the first place.

### How to learn the skill of progressive muscle relaxation:

1. Find a quiet time and place where you will not be disturbed. Make yourself as comfortable as possible in either a lying or sitting position.
2. Take a relaxed breath. Allow the tension to melt away as you breathe out.
3. Stretch and relax each muscle group using the instructions on the next page.
4. Tense each muscle group for three seconds and then relax. You do not need to tense your muscles as hard as you can. Just tense them “around three-quarters tight”.
5. If any of your muscles still don't feel relaxed, stretch them again, relax them and take another relaxed breath.
6. Carry out around 20 minutes of stretching and relaxing every day for two to three weeks to learn to recognise and control muscle tension.
7. **Relaxation exercises should not hurt. If you find any of the tensing movements uncomfortable, simply leave that part of the exercise out and concentrate on relaxing that area of your body.**

## How to stretch and relax each muscle group

<b>Muscle</b>	<b>Instructions for tensing</b>
Hands	Stretch out fingers and thumbs.
Wrists and forearms	Bend hands back at wrists.
Forearms and upper arms	Stretch arms by reaching forwards, away from you.
Shoulders	Pull shoulders gently downwards.
Upper back	Pull shoulders gently forwards.
Upper chest	Pull shoulders gently backwards.
Neck	Stretch head upwards.
Face	Open mouth and stretch eyebrows upwards.
Legs	Point toes away from you. Keep heels on the ground and pull toes towards you.
Chest	Take a deep breath in and hold it for two to three seconds before breathing out.

## Further sources of information

Our website: [www.sfh-tr.nhs.uk](http://www.sfh-tr.nhs.uk)

External websites may be referred to in specific cases. Any external websites are provided for your information and convenience. We cannot accept responsibility for the information found on them. Stating a web address does not imply we endorse a particular site. Neither does not stating a web address imply lack of endorsement.

## Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

The PALS team is available to help with any of your comments, compliments or concerns and will ensure a prompt and efficient service. Contact details:

- King's Mill Hospital **01623 672222**  
(out of hours answer phone)  
Email: Pals.kmh@sfh-tr.nhs.uk
- Newark Hospital **01636 685692**  
(out of hours answer phone)  
Email: Pals.nwk@sfh-tr.nhs.uk

If you need this information in a different language or format, please contact PALS, as above.

Whilst every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in this publication, Sherwood Forest Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust cannot accept liability for errors and omissions. The information should not replace advice that your relevant health professional would give you.

To be completed by the Communications office  
Leaflet code: PIL3027  
Created: Feb 2012 / Review Date: Feb 2014

*With thanks to Gloucestershire Pain  
Management*