

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

Some of your students' favorite stretches may not be the safest options.

BY KATHLEEN MCGUIRE

It makes sense that in an artform that is handed down from generation to generation, the stretches we teach our students are the same as those we learned as young dancers. But over time, research has shown that some of the stretches we've been doing for years can put undue stress on joints and fail to stretch the muscles they are targeting. As educators, it is important to know the difference between a good stretch and a bad stretch.

WHAT IS A "BAD" STRETCH?

"Dancers hardly ever look at what limitations the body has," says Kristian Berg, a doctor who specializes in connective tissue disorders and author of *Prescriptive Stretching*. "On the contrary, they want to push the limits of what is possible to do with the human body, often beyond what is physically healthy." Berg defines an unhealthy stretch as one that affects different muscles and joints from the ones you're attempting to target.

We've all seen students casually stretch on their stomachs, with legs in a straddle split. "This is one of the biggest culprits that we come across all the time, and it is still being taught to students," says Hilary Cartwright, ballet teacher and founder of Yoga for Dancers. In a bad straddle scenario, students' legs are rotating inward and overstretching the ligaments in the hips, as opposed to the muscles, says Cartwright. The proper way to stretch in a straddle is to keep

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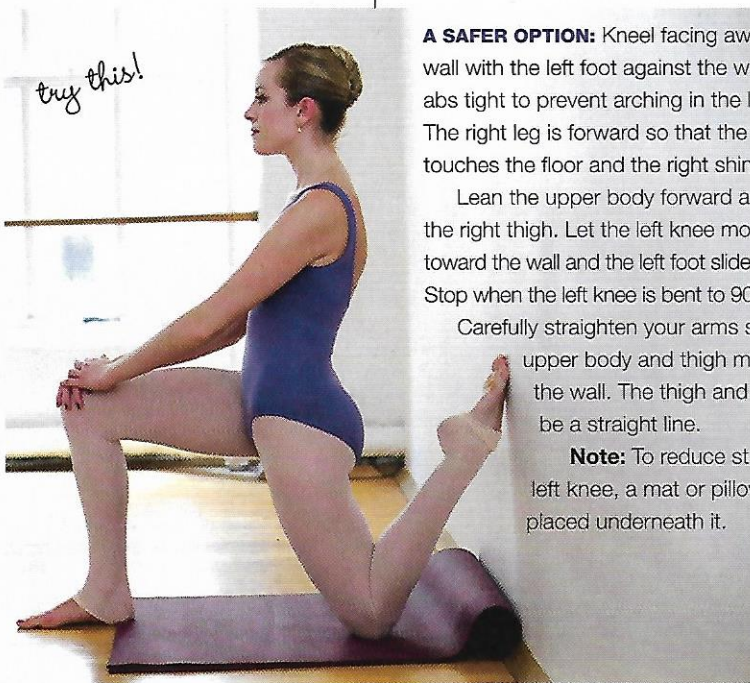
Do This, Not That

There are bad ways, good ways and better ways to stretch each muscle group effectively. Some common "bad" stretches can be done safely, but only if they are performed correctly. It's far easier to do them improperly and risk injury. In *Prescriptive Stretching*, Berg presents some alternatives that offer less room for error. They are safer for students to practice on their own, and they are each specifically designed to isolate a single muscle group with reduced stress on other parts of the body.



LESS SAFE: Stretching the front of your thigh by bringing your heel backward toward your buttocks while standing. The lower back easily sways, exposing the lumbar spine to injury.

Note: Cartwright points out that you can do this stretch without causing injury, but the lower back must be kept straight, and the foot should actively push into the hand to reduce stress on the knee.



A SAFER OPTION: Kneel facing away from the wall with the left foot against the wall. Keep abs tight to prevent arching in the lower back. The right leg is forward so that the entire foot touches the floor and the right shin is vertical.

Lean the upper body forward and rest it on the right thigh. Let the left knee move backward toward the wall and the left foot slides up the wall. Stop when the left knee is bent to 90 degrees.

Carefully straighten your arms so that the upper body and thigh move closer to the wall. The thigh and torso should be a straight line.

Note: To reduce stress on the left knee, a mat or pillow can be placed underneath it.

the body upright and the hands behind the legs, with the stomach engaged.

WHAT IS A "GOOD" STRETCH?

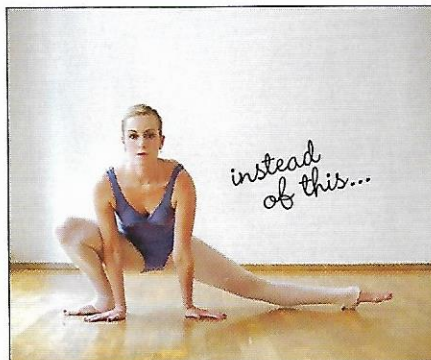
"Maximum stretch with minimal joint movement" is Berg's golden rule. And Jennifer Green, physical therapist and founder of PhysioArts in New York City, points out, "You don't always have to feel the stretch super-intensely for it to be beneficial." Sensation of a stretch is rarely a good indicator, because even if you're doing it wrong, you're stretching something and feeling it. She adds that students should be sure that their muscles are warm before going into any deep stretch.

Proper alignment is the foundation of any good stretch, and even a "good" stretch can easily be done incorrectly if the body placement is wrong. "My general rule is if you're stretching the front of the thigh or hip, you want to tuck your hips under," says Green. "If you're stretching any muscle group in the back of the thigh, you want to exaggerate the sway in the back slightly, and that

will isolate those muscles a little more clearly." Maintaining strength in your core muscles and keeping your hips square and level are also important when stretching. When a student is in an extreme stretch, like doing a split up the wall backwards, none of these things are being done effectively.

The greatest challenge for teachers is that most students stretch in unsupervised situations. Green recommends trying to incorporate a few minutes of cooldown stretching at the end of class as a way to observe your students' stretching habits, and to provide the opportunity to demonstrate proper methods. Cartwright points out that patience is an important value to instill in young dancers who are eager to achieve greater flexibility as quickly as they can. "It won't happen instantly," she says, "and you have to encourage them to find the pleasure in doing something correctly." **DT**

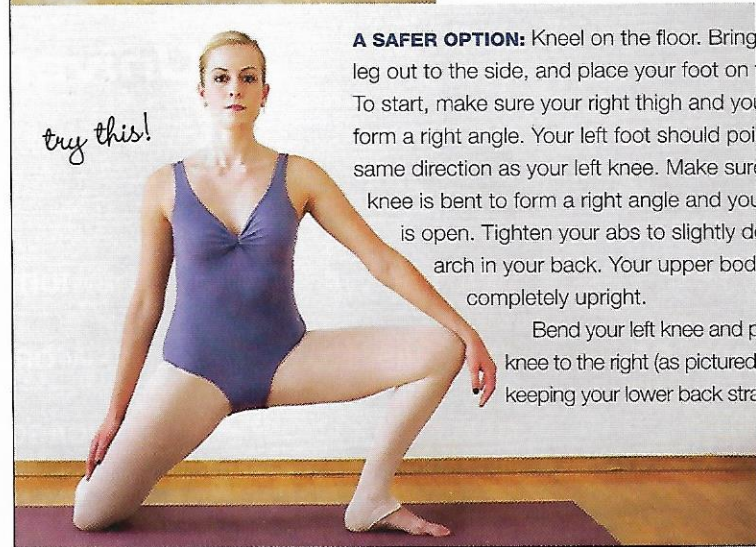
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Do This, Not That

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LESS SAFE: Stretching the inside of the leg while squatting. This strains the MCL in the extended knee. "You also end up working with the muscle you intend to stretch, to avoid sliding sideways without control," says Berg. "It's not efficient to stretch a muscle while it's contracting."



A SAFER OPTION: Kneel on the floor. Bring your left leg out to the side, and place your foot on the floor. To start, make sure your right thigh and your left thigh form a right angle. Your left foot should point in the same direction as your left knee. Make sure your left knee is bent to form a right angle and your right hip is open. Tighten your abs to slightly decrease the arch in your back. Your upper body should be completely upright.

Bend your left knee and press the right knee to the right (as pictured). Focus on keeping your lower back straight.