



# Flex Appeal

Pain in the ass? **Dominique Rowe** straightens out with a good stretch.



SHAPE UP THOSE ERM, BUNS.

COURTESY OF STRETCH

"Active Isolated Stretching" is the intelligent bodywork phenomenon currently taking the world by storm, and it's mostly due to one ex-Lamma Island resident. The charismatic hairball of a man, Chris Watts, has been called the "Einstein of Stretching." Just one week after opening his second Stretch clinic in London's medical mile Harley Street, the Evening Standard newspaper proclaimed Watts one of the city's 50 Most Wanted Health Gurus – and now the British press can't get enough of him.

Bank of East Asia chairman David Li says that thanks to Watts' AIS technique, he is "no longer in

pain and can move freely and comfortably once again, without the aid of a walking stick." Christine Loh calls Watts, "the best-trained person in his field to help diagnose and solve problems arising from a lifetime of poor posture or injury," and Betty Kadoorie calls him "a necessity, not a luxury." His first London clients included Lulu and Joyce Ma, and in July, his staff was "surprised when Woody Allen walked through the door."

OK, we get the picture. So what is the fuss all about? Watts's supremely logical technique, Active Isolated Stretching (AIS), has saved clients from painful invasive surgery, helped the infirm to walk without aid, increased mobility for those with neuromuscular diseases, and helped the able-bodied remove recurring pains. Due to the runaway success of AIS, Watts has inadvertently propelled a showering of breakaway AIS clinics around the city, many run by former employees – a fact that he acknowledges with a pensive pause. So what's the big deal with stretching anyway?

## Cats Do It

Stretching. Seems a little obvious doesn't it? But really it's not so simple. AIS was developed by US sports scientist Aaron Mattes (Watts' teacher). It is an anomaly, not quite fitting into any therapeutic category, but containing elements of physiotherapy, osteopathy, and the Alexander Technique. Stretches, says Watts, are precisely designed so that "the muscles being stretched are neurologically switched off or relaxed, due to the opposite muscles being engaged or contracted."

Significantly, in AIS a stretch is only held for two seconds. "This is safer as it can prevent an eccentric contraction or 'push/pull' feeling that can potentially tear tissues. A famously good example of such bad stretching was the 'ballistic method,' where small children were made to bounce painfully on the hockey pitch in freezing cold weather," says Watts. Another benefit is that the short stretches flush the muscles with blood, oxygenating them and moving out accumulated toxins from deep in the tissue – something Watts, with his fully oxygenated workspace and weekly Hydro Health visits is passionate about. ■

## Tried and Tested

After spending my life dabbling in dance, gymnastics, swimming, and yoga, flexibility was not an issue for me. Why did I need to stretch more? Like everyone, there were those little tweaks we all learn to live with: a pain in the neck, a stubborn hip, recurring migraines. As I walked through the door of the open plan clinic, Watts had me sized up. He pointed out that one leg was shorter than the other (not unusual), rooted in an unbalanced pelvis, which he says was likely giving me hip problems. He also began correcting my neck irregularities. By the end of the session, I had increased mobility in my hip, and had a list of exercises to practice at home. I felt no pain throughout the session – instead, I felt calm and relaxed, with a new fascination with and awareness of my own body.



GETTY IMAGES

## Mile-high Flex

Oh, the stress of being a globetrotting businessperson. Heavy bags carried asymmetrically, chronic dehydration, seats by the toilets, too many bloody marys... woe are we. The eternal optimist, Watts believes that for people like this, there is no better time than now for a good stretch: "Remember that sitting places eight times more pressure on your spine than standing," he says. He believes that basic spinal stretches are essential during long flights – and that moving around will automatically re-hydrate compressed intervertebral disks that are designed to cushion the spinal joints.

### While sitting, legs slightly apart:

- Breathe in, contract your stomach muscles, and lean forward, grabbing onto your lower legs. Gently pull your spine down to lengthen it. Hold the stretch no longer than two seconds and come back to start position. Repeat 10 times. This works like a pump to shunt blood and nutrients into the tissues that you are stretching, and the flexion will open all the spinal extensors that keep you straight and upright.

- While sitting, rotate your spine as far as you comfortably can to the right. With your right hand on the back of the chair pull yourself into a stretch holding no longer than two seconds. Return back to the start position. Repeat 10 times then repeat on left side.

- Clasp your hands behind your head, keeping your hips still. Rotate your trunk to your right as far as you can go. Drop the left elbow to the left knee to open all the lumbar structures – again, hold no longer than two seconds to prevent the myotatic stretch reflex (that shaky, muscle-spasm feeling) from engaging. Return to start position, repeat 10 times.

- To extend the spine and stretch all the spinal flexors (those things that cause people to buckle and bend forward), first place your hands behind the head. Keep the abdominal muscles engaged, take a deep breath and bend the spine from the mid-back and look up at the ceiling. Do not bend back too far as it will compress the lower back – do it with gentle movements of no more than 15 degrees backwards. This can be done sitting or standing. Repeat 10 times.

## Bendy Buns?

Being too stretchy can have its downside. Known as "hyper-mobility," it creates problems when muscles become longer than the ligaments designed to keep them in check. The answer? Strength training. Flexibility needs muscles.



COURTESY OF STRETCH

## Places to stretch:

**Stretch**, 4/F, Winsome House, 73 Wyndham Street, Central, 2167-8686, www.stretchasia.com.  
**PhysioCentral**, 1203 The Centrium, 60 Wyndham St, Central, 2801-4801

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