

Active Isolated Stretching

by Lois Orth-Zitoli, L.M.T., C.H.H.C.

A Revolutionary Approach to Self-Care

When I graduated from the Chicago School of Massage Therapy 31 years ago, I never really thought about how long I might work in this profession. I was filled with youthful enthusiasm and excited to start my own business. Since 1985, my business has gone through many phases: private practice, then running my own massage therapy clinic with a team of 10 therapists for 15 years, then back to private practice, with teaching and health coaching added in along the way.

There is one truth that I have observed after years of knowing and working with many massage therapists: We are great at taking care of others and downright rotten at taking care of ourselves. I have to confess that in the past I was guilty of working myself to the point of exhaustion, unable to set boundaries for myself. But along the way, I had to figure out how to care for myself or be forced to leave the profession I love.

I want to share with you a unique approach to stretching that has revolutionized my regimen for self-care, adding years to the professional life of my hands. The technique is called Active Isolated Stretching (AIS). It was developed by Aaron Mattes, L.M.T., a kinesiologist from Sarasota, Florida. Although AIS is often described as stretching for athletes, it has been used effectively on people with Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, post-polio syndrome and arthritis.

I will first introduce you to the AIS methodology and then teach you some of my favorite stretches for the wrist, hand and fingers.

The AIS Method

I call AIS a unique approach to stretching because, unlike traditional stretching, one only holds each stretch for two seconds. In this way, you never trigger

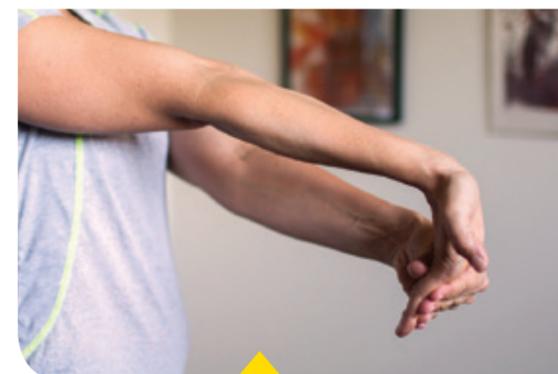
the stretch reflex, and most importantly, stretching doesn't hurt.

If you ask people why they don't enjoy stretching, most of the time they will tell you that it's too painful. So right there, you have overcome a major hurdle to stretching.

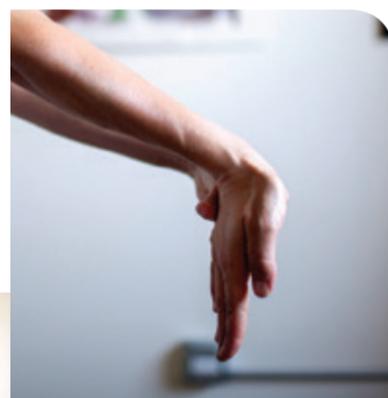
Another feature is that you move in and out of the stretch (that's the active part), meaning that there is a starting point and an ending point (end range of motion) where you go two-to-three degrees past your active end-range to apply the stretch. This active motion helps to detoxify the body, because as you move the body part being stretched you are moving blood and lymph, which increases oxygen and nutrition.

I find that when people are very sore from a hard workout, an hour of AIS speeds recovery faster than a full-body massage. As a matter of fact, one of my very competitive triathlete clients will call me if she is miserable with delayed-onset muscle soreness, because she has learned that an hour of AIS is the quickest road to recovery.

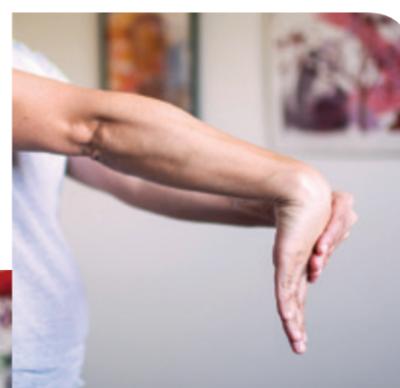
The other feature of AIS that assists this detoxifying effect is breathing. As you do each stretch, you exhale



Wrist Extension (Supine): With your arm out in front of you (elbow straight, palm up), actively move fingers toward floor. Place fingers of opposite hand across palm and gently increase the stretch. In this variation, the stretch is felt in the palmar aspect of the wrist and throughout forearm flexors. Repeat stretch with hand at 45-degree angle each way.



Wrist Flexion (Elbow Straight)
Place arm in front of you with elbow straight and palm facing floor. Bend wrist downward to your end range of motion by contracting wrist flexor muscles. Apply a gentle stretch across back of hand with opposite hand. Repeat stretch with hand at 45-degree angle, toward ulna and radius.

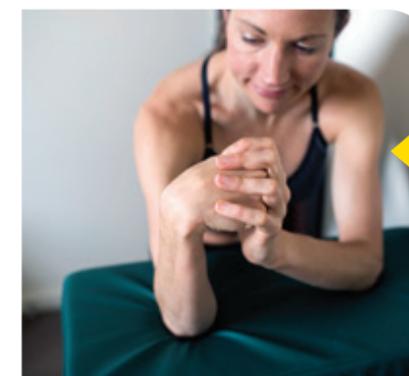
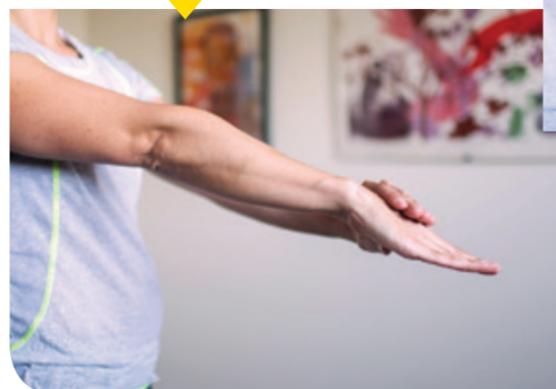


Finger Flexor Stretch (Supine): Variation 1: (four fingers at once) Extend the wrist and fingers backward and assist with the opposite hand. For best results, extend elbow and wrist. This stretch can be done with the hand in both supine or prone position.

Variation 2: (single finger prone) The finest finger flexor stretch involves stretching one finger at a time, as each finger has a different level of tension. Extend wrist backward as far as possible, then place entire palm of hand along length of finger rather than only on the end of finger. Extend finger as far as possible and assist with opposite hand. For supine position, turn palm to face upward and stretch using hand position as described for prone single finger stretch.



REBECCA PEPLINSKI PHOTOGRAPHY



Wrist-Finger Extensor Stretch: Bend elbow and rest it on table with hand pointed toward ceiling. Make a firm fist and flex hand at wrist. At the end of active movement, gently increase stretch with free hand. This stretch is focused on extensors of hand.

Begin this with a gradual approach that is more likely to stick with you, hopefully for a lifetime.

during the stretching phase, and inhale as you move back to the starting position between each stretch. Each stretch is typically repeated 10 times during a stretching session. These slow, gentle repetitions create new neuromuscular pathways. This is especially important for people who are recovering from athletic injuries, broken bones or surgeries.

For example, one of my clients fell and broke her elbow. After having surgery and being in a cast for six weeks, her ability to flex and extend her elbow was greatly limited. AIS stretching has been invaluable in my client's recovery. This is because the repetition of movement involved in AIS helps the body remember what full range of motion felt like, re-establishing the feedback loop to the brain with every stretch and movement.

The beauty of this system of stretching cannot be overstated. It is not unusual to experience a very noticeable increase in range of motion as well as relief of stiffness and pain after one session. And because stretching can be painful, especially in post-op and injury situations, the concept of taking a stretch two to three degrees past the active end point facilitates increased range of motion with only a slight irritation rather than pain.

What follows is a summary of the steps involved in Active Isolated Stretching that I have just described:

Thumb Opposition Stretch: Turn your right palm so it is facing upward (supine). Move the thumb away from fingers and extend it downward. Take your left hand and place it underneath the right hand, wrapping the right thumb with fingers and thumb of left hand. Gradually move thumb horizontally away from index finger toward floor for the stretch. Release thumb and move it toward the palm between stretches.



Five points

1. Move the body part being stretched to the starting position for the stretch.
2. Gently stretch the body part two to three degrees past the end point and hold the stretch for two seconds.
3. Inhale during the movement phase of the stretch and exhale during the stretch.
4. Move the body part being stretched back to the starting position between stretches.
5. Repeat each stretch 10 times.

Hand, wrist & finger stretches

In the AIS system of stretching, there are between 20 and 25 stretches for the wrist, hand and fingers. The positioning is very precise and is designed to isolate muscle bellies, as well as origins and insertions of muscles, depending on positioning.

I am including pictures and instructions for eight of my favorite wrist, hand and finger stretches, the ones I go back to on a daily basis. If you currently do not have a daily regimen of care for yourself and your hands, I would like to suggest a plan for you to easily incorporate these stretches into your life.

Begin this the way one might start an exercise program—not the get-in-shape-in-a-weekend approach,

Thumb Adductor Stretch: Place hand in front of you (or rest it on a table) with palm down, and move thumb away from fingers. Gently pull your thumb back toward your body.



but with a gradual approach that is more likely to stick with you, hopefully for a lifetime.

In my work as a health coach, I work with my clients to make changes slowly and incrementally in order to create a new health habit that will ultimately become routine.

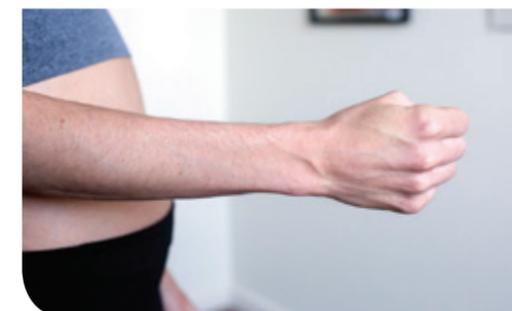
Here are some strategies that might help you make these hand and wrist stretches part of your daily routine:

- Choose one stretch that you like or that feels most beneficial to you and commit to do that stretch on both hands once a day for a week.
- Choose a time that works for you to do the stretch, so that you don't forget. Schedule it around something you do every day, like when you get up in the morning, before you go to bed at night, or before you start your first client.
- If you have an alert option on your phone, set it for the time you chose so you have a reminder.
- After one week, if you have done your stretch every day, then add a second stretch to your daily routine. Do the two stretches every day for a week.
- Add one new stretch every week until you have learned all of the stretches illustrated in this article. This

approach will help you memorize your stretches so you won't need to look at the pictures.

You are probably familiar with many of these stretches, but now you will be doing them with a new approach: the AIS method. Once you have learned and practiced all the stretches shown here, you can choose which ones are most important for you to do on a daily basis.

Thumb Extensor Stretch: This is a powerful stretch for the extensors of the thumb. Place thumb deep inside palm of hand and flex the four fingers around the thumb to make a fist. Bend wrist toward the little finger side of wrist (toward ulna) and grasp with opposite hand (fingers on top, thumb underneath) and stretch fist toward floor to stretch the thumb extensors. Move hand in opposite direction between stretches.



I do not do every stretch for my wrists, hands and fingers every single day. But I definitely do some of them every day. After you experience how wonderful your hands feel with the AIS stretching, I hope you will find it easy to make these stretches part of your daily routine. Your hands will thank you for it!

Lois Orth-Zitoli, L.M.T., C.H.H.C. (fullcirclehealthinc.com), is a public speaker, teacher, massage therapist and health coach. She owns Full Circle Health in Chicago, Illinois, and currently teaches workshops in the Benjamin Method of orthopedic massage and injury assessment, as well as stretching workshops.