

Range of Motion for ALS

As ALS progresses and muscles weaken, less movement each day can lead to tightness, stiff joints, pain, and discomfort. This can affect your mobility, flexibility, and ability to complete daily activities.

You can reduce this joint stiffness and maintain greater flexibility by stretching and doing range of motion (ROM) exercises, which are slow movements that target specific parts of the body such as your neck, shoulders, elbows, wrists, fingers, hamstrings, knees, calves, and ankles.



Developing Your Routines

It is important to create a stretching and range of motion exercise plan that is tailored to your specific needs. Ideally, you will find someone with ALS experience, like the physical or occupational therapist at your ALS clinic or home health agency, who can develop a custom routine and teach you and your caregiver how to properly do each exercise.

You can stretch and do ROM exercises on your own or with the help of a caregiver. Some people find that even if they are capable of doing them on their own, they feel a greater benefit when someone else is assisting so they can relax throughout. If you can do the exercises on your own but are getting overly fatigued, you may also want to ask for assistance.

If you cannot do parts of the movements or stretches on your own, a caregiver or therapist can assist as needed. If you are unable to assist with the movements, your caregiver or therapist can do them for you. When possible, sit or lie down to conserve energy while doing your exercises.

Here are some general guidelines for doing range of motion exercises:

- Stretches and ROM exercises should be slow, steady, and gentle.
- Do not force movements or push past the point of resistance.
- Back off if you feel pain, discomfort, or fatigue.
- Make sure that you can breathe comfortably throughout.
- If you cannot complete the full routine, start with a few repetitions and build up from there.
- When stretching, slowly move to the point of resistance and hold as advised.

You will get maximum benefit if you do these exercises once or twice every day (or as prescribed). Try to integrate them into your daily routine and set aside enough time. Some people find that breaking their exercises up into a few short sessions throughout the day works better than doing them all at once.

If something changes and your current exercise plan no longer works for you, ask your physical or occupational therapist to modify your plan.

How Caregivers Can Help

A physical or occupational therapist will show the caregiver how to perform or assist with each movement and stretch. In general, you will want to support the weight of the involved body part, move it slowly through a gentle range of motion up to the point of resistance, and back off at any sign of pain or discomfort. Allow the person to actively participate as much as they would like.

Lower Body Stretching and Range of Motion Exercises

Preserving range of motion in the lower body is particularly important for mobility. Stretching tight calves and Achilles tendons and improving ankle flexibility may help improve walking and transferring and lessen foot drop. Common lower body exercises include the runner stretch, hamstring stretch, hip and knee flexion, and ankle flexion.

Upper Body Stretching and Range of Motion Exercises

Preserving range of motion in the upper body can help you continue to perform daily activities. Shoulder stiffness from lack of movement is common and can be very painful when doing things like dressing and transferring. Curled fingers and thumbs can prevent you from grasping and doing a variety of everyday tasks. Upper body range of motion exercises can improve flexibility and function in your neck, shoulders, elbows, wrists, hands, fingers, and thumbs.

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