The SMOOTH Warm-Up Guide

By Dr. Christian Poulos

Why this exists

Nine movements, about 15 minutes a day, built around the joints that quietly end most lifting careers: hips, shoulders, and elbows.

I've had bicep tendonitis in my left elbow for years. Vertical pulls flared it. Muay Thai made it sore. Pushing muscle ups reminded me it was still there. For a long time I trained around it, which mostly meant I trained a little bit less.

What finally helped was boring: a daily stretch routine for the tissue that gets tight from sitting and pressing, and a pre-gym warm-up that gets the joints ready before load hits them. This is that routine, exactly as I run it!

It has two parts:

1. **The Daily 4.** Four stretches, done every day, gym or no gym. Roughly 8 minutes.
2. **The Pre-Gym 5.** Five movements done before every session. Roughly 7 minutes.

The goal is simple. Joints that feel smooth under load, so you can keep training hard for the next 20 years instead of the next 2.

Check yourself first

If you tick three or more of these, your joints are already charging interest on your training.

- ☐ You skip certain lifts because one joint "doesn't like them"
- ☐ Your first working set feels like a warm-up set
- ☐ You can't sit in a deep squat for 60 seconds with heels flat
- ☐ Your shoulders round forward at your desk and stay that way in the gym
- ☐ An elbow, shoulder, or hip aches the morning after pulling or pressing
- ☐ Your current warm-up is 5 minutes on a treadmill and an empty-bar set
- ☐ You've had the same nagging ache for more than 6 months

The last one matters most. An ache that lasts half a year usually points to a load pattern, a strength imbalance, or tissue that never got addressed.

Part 1: The Daily 4

Do these every day, ideally in the evening or after sitting for a long block. Hold each position for 30 to 60 seconds per side, 2 rounds. Breathe slowly through your nose and let each exhale take you a little deeper. Mild stretch, never pain.

1. Levator scapulae stretch

Video: Levator Scapulae Stretch
Targets: the muscle running from your neck to the top of your shoulder blade.
How: Sit tall. Hold the edge of your chair with your right hand to pin that shoulder down. Turn your head about 45 degrees to the left, then tuck your chin toward your left armpit. Use your left hand to add light pressure on the back of your head.
Why: Desk posture and heavy shrugging patterns keep this muscle short. A tight levator pulls the shoulder blade up and out of position, which shows up as neck tension and cranky overhead pressing.

2. Hip flexor stretch

Video: Dynamic Stretch Hip Flexors
Targets: the front of the hip (psoas and rectus femoris).
How: Kneel on your right knee, left foot forward, half-kneeling. Squeeze your right glute hard and tuck your pelvis under. Shift forward a few inches until you feel the front of the right hip open. Reach your right arm overhead to deepen it.
Why: Hours of sitting shorten the hip flexors. Short hip flexors tilt the pelvis forward, load the lower back, and blunt glute output in squats and deadlifts. The glute squeeze is the part most people skip, and it's the part that makes the stretch work.

3. Piriformis stretch

Video: Seated Stretch for Piriformis
Targets: the deep hip rotator under the glute.
How: Lie on your back. Cross your right ankle over your left knee in a figure-four. Grab behind your left thigh and pull it toward your chest until you feel the stretch deep in the right glute.
Why: A tight piriformis limits hip rotation and can refer discomfort into the glute and back of the leg. Loose hips mean the lower back stops doing the hips' job.

4. Chest doorway stretch

Video: Doorway Pec and Shoulder Stretch with Dr. Raz
Targets: pecs and the front of the shoulder.
How: Stand in a doorway. Place your forearms on the frame with elbows at shoulder height, bent 90 degrees. Step one foot through and lean forward until you feel the chest open. Keep your ribs down so the stretch stays in the chest, not the lower back. Try elbows slightly higher on round two to hit the lower pec fibers.
Why: Pressing volume plus a forward-rounded day pulls the shoulders into internal rotation. That position narrows the space the shoulder joint needs to move cleanly overhead.

Part 2: The Pre-Gym 5

Run these in order before every session. The sequence goes hips first, then shoulders from big range to small control. Keep it controlled and unhurried. You should finish warmer, looser, and

with zero fatigue.

1. Deep squat hold

Video: Mobility - Deep Squat Hold
Dose: 3 holds of 30 to 45 seconds.
How: Feet shoulder-width, toes slightly out. Sink as low as you can with heels down. Press your elbows into your inner knees to pry the hips open. Rock gently side to side. Hold a post or rack if your heels lift.
Why: It takes the hips, knees, and ankles through their full range under bodyweight before you ask them to do it with a barbell.

2. 90/90 hip switches

Video: 90 90 Hip Switch
Dose: 8 to 10 switches per side.
How: Sit on the floor, both knees bent 90 degrees, one leg in front of you and one out to the side. Sit tall. Keeping your feet planted, rotate both knees to the other side so the legs swap positions. Use your hands behind you at first, then work toward hands-free.
Why: This trains internal and external hip rotation together. Most lifters only lack one direction and never find out which. You'll feel it immediately on the stiff side.

3. Band dislocates

Video: Band Shoulder Dislocates
Dose: 10 to 15 slow reps.
How: Hold a light band with a wide grip. Keep your arms straight and bring the band overhead and behind you until it touches your lower back, then return. Narrow your grip slowly over weeks, never by forcing it.
Why: It moves the shoulder through its full arc with almost no load, so the joint is lubricated and the surrounding tissue is warm before pressing or pulling.

4. Band pull-aparts

Video: Underhand Band Pull Apart
Dose: 2 sets of 15 to 20.
How: Hold a band at shoulder height, arms straight, hands shoulder-width. Pull it apart until it touches your chest by squeezing your shoulder blades together. Pause one second. Return slowly.
Why: It wakes up the rear delts and mid-back, the muscles that hold the shoulder blade in place. Most men are press-dominant here, and this evens the ledger before the first set.

5. Light YTWL

Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FdTMHte4Mxc
Dose: 1 round, 8 reps per letter. Use 1 to 3 lb plates or no weight at all.
How: Lie chest-down on an incline bench or hinge forward at the hips. Raise your arms to form

each letter with thumbs up: Y (arms overhead in a V), T (straight out to the sides), W (elbows bent, squeeze shoulder blades down and back), L (elbows at 90 degrees, rotate forearms up).
Why: The rotator cuff and lower traps are small muscles that stabilize the shoulder under every heavy lift. They fatigue fast, so the weight stays embarrassingly light. If you're tempted to go heavier, you're missing the point of the drill.

When a warm-up isn't enough: how I'm fixing my elbow

A warm-up prepares healthy tissue. An existing injury needs its own plan. Here's the four-part framework I'm using on my left elbow, and you can apply the same logic to any nagging joint.
1. Find the imbalance. Tendon pain rarely shows up in isolation. In my case, my triceps were far stronger than my biceps, and the biceps tendon was absorbing load it wasn't conditioned for. So the plan starts with rebuilding the weaker side.
2. Load the tendon on purpose. Tendons adapt to load. They just adapt slowly and dislike sudden spikes. I'm doing high-rep banded curls (sets of 25 to 40, slow and controlled). The band's resistance curve keeps joint stress low while still giving the tendon a steady, repeatable signal to remodel.
3. Modify the movement, keep the goal. I still want the muscle up. So I changed the angle: pulling straight down with my elbows tight to my sides. That path doesn't irritate the tendon. Find the version of the lift your joint tolerates and train that version hard.
4. Treat the injury as an injury. I'm also using BPC-157 and TB-500 to support tendon repair. They are a tool I chose with full context. They do nothing for you if steps 1 through 3 are missing.

Training around an injury means avoiding the lifts that hurt. Fixing it means changing the conditions that caused it. The first keeps you in the same place for years. I know, because I did it for years.

Cheat sheet

Screenshot this and keep it on your phone.

When	Movement	Dose
Daily	Levator scapulae stretch	2 x 30 to 60 sec per side
Daily	Hip flexor stretch	2 x 30 to 60 sec per side
Daily	Piriformis stretch	2 x 30 to 60 sec per side
Daily	Chest doorway stretch	2 x 30 to 60 sec
Pre-gym	Deep squat hold	3 x 30 to 45 sec
Pre-gym	90/90 hip switches	8 to 10 per side
Pre-gym	Band dislocates	10 to 15 reps
Pre-gym	Band pull-aparts	2 x 15 to 20
Pre-gym	Light YTWL	8 reps per letter

Run this for 30 days before judging it. Joint tissue adapts on a timeline of weeks, and the payoff

shows up as lifts that stop hurting.

What this guide can't tell you

This routine covers what most trained men need. It can't tell you which joint is your weak link, what's driving it, or whether something like recovery, hormones, inflammation, or a hidden strength imbalance is part of the picture.

That's what the Health and Performance Audit is for. We look at your training, your history, and your markers, then tell you exactly what applies to you. If an ache has followed you for more than 6 months, start there.

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This guide is educational and isn't medical advice. Stop any movement that causes sharp pain, and see a qualified clinician for persistent or worsening symptoms. Consult a qualified physician before beginning any new supplement, peptide, compound, diet, or exercise protocol.

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