Stretching is a very important element of a good fitness program. Always warm up prior to stretching. You can begin with a short walk, 5 to 10 minutes, then stop for some early-walk stretches before continuing your walk.

Stretch slowly, without bouncing, to the point where tension is felt. If stretching hurts, you are stretching too hard! Hold stretches for at least 20 to 30 seconds.

Here are some sample early-walk stretches.

**Toe points**  
Lift one foot off the floor and gently point the toe. Hold for a few seconds. Now, flex your foot pointing your toe up. Do about five of these on each foot.

**Ankle Circles**  
Stand with your weight on one foot, or sit. Lift one foot off the floor and gently point the toe. Rotate your ankle and do about ten circles in each direction. Then change feet. Repeat two or three times with each foot.

**The Twist**  
Stand with your feet shoulder width apart, knees bent, and your arms straight out parallel to ground. Keep your lower body stationary while swinging your arms from side to side. Do this several times to loosen up your back and shoulders.

**Arm Circles**  
Hold your arms straight out to the side. Make small circles going backward, gradually getting larger and larger. Rest for a second and do the same thing in the forward direction. Do this a couple of times until your arms, shoulders and upper back are warmed up.

**Proper Posture**  
While you are walking, follow good posture recommendations.  
- Stand tall, do not arch your back  
- Do not lean forward or backward  
- Keep eyes forward  
- Keep chin up and parallel to the ground to reduce back strain  
- Suck in your stomach
Normal signs of exertion include increased heart rate – without pain – and mild sweating. You should be able to carry on a conversation but not sing. If you experience unusual or serious pain, stop and check it out before resuming.

Near the end of your walk, slow your pace for several minutes to cool down. Complete your workout by thoroughly stretching all muscle groups.

Here are some sample after-walk stretches.

**Calf Stretch**
Take a big step forward with your left foot, keeping your right heel on the ground. Hold. Repeat on the other side. Keep your body upright and abs tight. Do not arch your back.

**Hamstring and Lower Back**
Slowly bend forward from your waist with your knees slightly bent. Reach for the floor and hold. Bend only as far as comfortable.

**Outer thigh and buttocks and spine**
While lying on your back bring your right knee up. Place your left hand on your thigh and gently pull it over to your left side. Do not pull at the knee. Your shoulders, left leg and back should remain flat. Pull gently. Then repeat on the left side.

**Quadriceps Stretch**
Stand and hold a stationary object for balance. Bend your right knee, bringing your foot toward your buttocks. Keeping your left knee slightly bent, grasp your right ankle with the opposite hand. Slowly pull your leg up and back, bringing your foot as high as comfortable. Repeat with other leg. (To protect your knee, think of pulling the quads back rather than pulling the foot toward your buttocks.)

**Shoulder Stretch**
Stand upright. Cross left arm over chest. Place your right hand on your upper arm and pull arm in tight to chest. Be sure to keep shoulders down and do not pull at the elbow. Hold, and then repeat stretch with other arm.

**Neck Relaxer**
Turn and look over your right shoulder and hold. Repeat on the left side. Don’t hyper-extend the neck, or tilt it backwards.

Source: National Institutes of Health