

5 Ways Foam Roller Exercises Can Improve Your Workout

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If you've ever been in a gym, sporting goods store or even the fitness aisle at Target, you've probably seen a foam roller. If you felt confused about how to use one, you're not alone. While becoming more mainstream, foam rollers still remain a mystery to many people and even trainers.

Foam roller exercises, also called myofascial release, is a form of massage that fitness-minded folks do either before exercise to loosen up sore muscles and tight joints, or after a workout, in an effort to aid muscle recovery.

Foam roller exercises and other self-myofascial release techniques have become increasingly popular, and for good reason. Partly that stems from a better understanding about the healing benefits of soft tissue care, or massage. Massage can ultimately become cost-prohibitive since unless you are an athlete or just have a few hundred extra bucks lying around, you probably opt infrequently for a massage as a luxury or a splurge more than a necessity.

Rolling yourself out on a foam roller becomes an affordable alternative to massage therapy. Those dense, round pieces of foam can deliver many benefits of therapeutic massage without the cost.

What Is Myofascial Release?

You might wonder what myofascial release means. Fascia is sort of like plastic wrap that covers pretty much every part of your body, comprised of collagen fibers that surrounds and penetrates your muscles, organs and nerves. Fascia essentially holds us together.

Of course, sometimes holding everything together can take its toll on your body. It's no different for our fascia. Through overtraining, it can become sore and restricted. Because of little tears that sometimes don't heal properly, adhesions develop. If the connective tissue surrounding your muscle becomes restricted, you'll notice your muscles will also become restricted in their movement.

Myofascial release describes what happens when you apply pressure to the affected areas to eliminate adhesions and release tension, ultimately improving movement and restoring the body back to its natural state. Foam rolling, myofascial release encompasses a wide range of modalities including Rolfing, massage and the Graston technique.

5 Health Benefits of Foam Roller Exercises

While there are many reasons to incorporate foam rolling into your fitness routine, let's briefly look at 5.

1. Improved flexibility and increased joint range of motion

For years, stretching was the standard method to decrease muscle tightness and improve flexibility prior to either working out or performing a sport. Newer research, however, shows foam roller exercises before an activity can lead to an increase in flexibility.

2. Better circulation

Because blood carries oxygen throughout the body, good circulation becomes crucial to overall health. Among other reasons, a decrease in our circulation can lead to a whole host of problems like numbness in our limbs, impaired cognitive ability (the ability to think clearly!) and a weak immune system. Myofascial release can help improve circulation by breaking up the tight areas where blood flow may become restricted.

3. Stress reduction

Foam roller exercises can help reduce stress post-workout. One study found myofascial release can lower cortisol, your stress hormone that you want to seriously dial down after a strenuous workout.

4. Reduce exercise-related soreness

Whether you are an experienced athlete or a weekend warrior, you've probably experienced delayed onset muscle soreness (DOMS). Simply put, DOMS is the pain and stiffness in your muscles that can typically set in anywhere from 24–48 hours after an intense workout.

However, research finds foam rolling can substantially reduce the chances of that soreness creeping in so that you don't spend the day after your first cycling class stuck on the couch wondering why your legs hate you so much.

5. Prevent injury

Treating an injury becomes much easier when you avoid it in the first place. Oftentimes a consistent routine of proper stretching techniques combined with foam roller exercises can prevent many injuries associated with tightness and overuse, such as iliotibial band syndrome and other common running injuries. The iliotibial band runs from the top of the leg by your hip to just below your knee. It tends to be particularly susceptible to injury, especially in runners. One caveat: If not done properly, you can do more harm than good. Rolling on an already inflamed area can actually increase inflammation, thereby giving you the exact opposite effect you are trying to achieve.

The Best Foam Roller Exercises

Now that you have a pretty solid understanding of exactly what foam rolling is and how it can benefit you directly, you are probably wondering how to incorporate them into your fitness routine.

Ideally, the following exercises should be done for about a minute on each area to allow the muscle to relax. As you roll, take some slow, deep breaths. We have a tendency to hold our breath when we are concentrating on something, especially when something feels new to us. Remain mindful of your breathing during this process.

Hamstrings and Glutes

So many of us have extremely tight hamstrings from sitting at our desks all day, which can cause lower-back pain. It's why you can benefit from hamstring stretches and exercises that involve the foam roller.

To roll out your hamstrings and glutes, start by sitting on the floor and placing the foam roller long ways underneath your legs. You will use your arms to support yourself and adjust how much pressure you are applying to your legs. The more body weight you transfer to your arms, the easier things will be on your hamstrings.

If you feel like you need to put more pressure on your hamstrings, simply shift more of your bodyweight to your legs and less in your arms. You will want to just roll yourself along the roller from your glutes down to just above your knees. Again, spend about a minute here and make sure you're not holding your breath.

Quadriceps

The front of our legs can certainly become sore and tight. Balance becomes crucial, so if you're going to work on those hamstrings, turn over and give equal attention to your quadriceps.

To do this, place the foam roller underneath your legs and with your body weight on your forearms, begin to roll yourself back and forth from the top of your knees to your pelvic bone. You will want to keep your abs engaged on this one and keep your feet off the floor as you're rolling.

Iliotibial (IT) Band

Although IT band issues are usually associated with runners, everyone can be affected with IT band issues and can result in knee and lower back pain. You need to begin working on knee strengthening exercises as well as foam roller exercises for the IT band.

To roll out your IT band, you'll want to position yourself with the side of your leg on top of the roller. You can take some of the pressure off the IT band directly by transferring your body weight to your arms as you roll from just below your hip to the top of your knee and keeping your other foot on the ground so that your opposite leg supports you.

Upper Back

We sit a lot, which can take its toll on our upper backs. This exercise becomes a great way to loosen up knots associated with phones that won't stop ringing and rush-hour traffic that won't move when you have a car full of crying kids and a pint of ice cream melting over all your other groceries.

Place the foam roller perpendicular to your body and lean your upper back against it. Place your hands directly behind your head, lift your hips off the floor, and gently begin to roll from the top of your shoulder blades to the middle of your back.

Complications and Precautions Regarding Foam Rolling

As with most things, start slowly with your new foam rolling routine and gradually increase over time. Try incorporating either before or after a workout a couple of times a week and then go from there.

If don't currently have a workout routine, you can still reap all the benefits of foam rolling. Using one during commercial breaks of your favorite show becomes a great way to initiate foam rollers into your routine. Some other common foam rolling mistakes include:

Slow It Down

I often see people rolling back and forth on a foam roller like it's some sort of competition to see how quickly they can do it. Using a foam roller isn't like racing to the finish line. You want to slow it down and give your muscles enough time to actually relax and begin to break up the adhesions in your fascia.

Spending Too Much Time on Sore Spots

Can we permanently shelf the "no pain, no gain" mentality? We are programmed to believe that if a little bit of something is good for us, then clearly MORE must be even better. As with many other things, that's not the case with foam rolling. Spending too much time (over, say, a minute) applying pressure directly on a knot means you might hit a nerve or damage the tissue, resulting in some nasty bruising. Spend about 20 seconds on a knot and don't try and be a hero by seeing how long you can take the pain.

Foam rolling should be modified or avoided by people who have osteoporosis and by pregnant women. Osteoporosis causes bones to become brittle and fragile. Risk of breaking a bone could be greatly increased by foam rolling.

Pregnant women release a hormone called relaxin, which allows the body to relax the joints, especially in the pelvis, to let the baby pass through the birth canal. During pregnancy, stretching and foam rolling (especially if you are inexperienced) can actually cause more harm than good.

Final Thoughts About Foam Rolling Exercises

Foam rolling becomes a great tool to have in your arsenal to feel better and prevent injury. It's inexpensive, easy to use, and provides benefits for athletes and laypeople alike. Always pay attention to your body. If something doesn't feel right or pain becomes worse, see your physician to determine the underlying problem.

Adductors



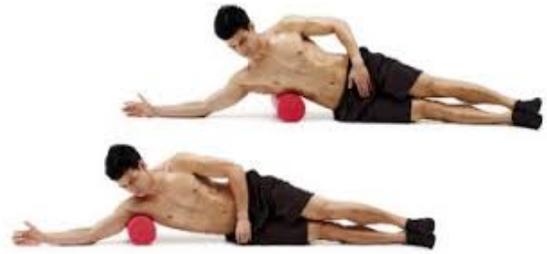
IT Band



Calf



Lats



Chest Stretch



Piriformis



Hamstrings



Quadriceps

