

Foam Rolling 101

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The use of various foam roller devices is gaining popularity in the fitness and rehabilitation world. Rollers vary in size and density, but the 6-inch x 36-inch roller pictured below is a popular choice. They are produced in different colors which can indicate different densities (black is typically a high-density roller), but not always. Typically the rollers are quite firm and do not compress, making them effective for self-massage or myofascial release, postural exercises, and core stability workouts (common in Pilates).

Skin, muscles, and other underlying tissues are separated by layers of fascia which can become adhered with injury, strain, or normal “wear and tear” associated with training. These adhesions, along with regular tightness in the muscle, can impede performance and lead to further soft tissue or joint injuries. “Knots” or “trigger points” are created in the muscle, which often have inadequate blood supply and don’t respond well to pulling or stretching. They require alternative release methods such as those described below. Additionally, “rolling out” tight muscles such as the piriformis, calf, IT band, and quadriceps on the roller can be an effective way to improve flexibility. The prescribed amount of rolling can vary greatly depending on the individual and the problem. But once a tender point is identified, we recommend maintaining direct pressure on the point for 30-60 seconds, and repeating 2-3 times on each point. For general massage or myofascial release, roll over the muscle 10 times or for a maximum of 1-2 minutes. With these techniques, you can spend a total of 5-10 minutes on the roller, twice daily and achieve great results. Using the roller once after workouts and one other time the same day is recommended. If soreness increases, allow 1-2 days between for recovery. In general, tenderness should decrease after the first few sessions.



Quadriceps



Gluteals/Piriformis



Hamstrings



Calf (gastrocnemius-soleus)

For knee issues, spend extra time rolling the muscles on the front of the thighs known as the quadriceps group. For iliotibial (IT Band) symptoms, located on the side of the knee, focus your rolling along the outside portion of your quadriceps where it meets the tight IT Band. Rolling directly on your IT Band, or the side of your thigh, can be quite painful and not as therapeutic because there isn’t as much tissue there to work with. IT Band symptoms can also be traced to dysfunction in the gluteal and piriformis muscles, so rolling the buttock muscles is a good idea. For healthy feet, ankles, and lower leg muscles, spend extra time on the calf.

A quick and easy maintenance routine for runners is pictured above. Spend 1-2 minutes on each calf, hamstring, quadriceps, and buttock group. If you have a certain problem area that simply won’t “release” no matter how much you roll, stretch or massage, it is probably due to faulty running form or a chronic compensation for a weak area. For example, if you have weak hip or core muscles the IT Band will often get overworked by trying to help compensate and do work it was not designed to do! Hamstring and calf muscles are susceptible to the same overuse if your hip muscles aren’t performing adequately or your feet are landing too far in front of your body (commonly referred to as “overstriding”). If you are having difficulty identifying or correcting a chronic issue, consider having a qualified running coach look at your form or see a physical therapist who can assess potential muscle imbalances.



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