

## **It's time for a good stretch**

Simple tricks such as raising your eyebrows can help you improve movement. It's all because of the fascia, the connective tissue that surrounds muscles.

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Last update: April 4, 2010 - 6:42 PM

The secret to touching your toes is a tennis ball. You don't need to throw it, hit it or catch it. You just need to roll it under each foot for a few seconds. Then put it aside, bend down again and you're guaranteed to reach a smidge closer to the ground.

Is it magic? Nope, it's anatomy.

Twice presenters showed off this nifty trick recently at the IDEA Personal Trainer Institute in Alexandria, Va., and twice the audience went wild. That's because even among the gym crowd, most people don't know much about the fascia, the connective tissue that surrounds our muscles. And they know even less about how to manipulate it to improve movement patterns.

The ball trick works, explains Justin Price, author of "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Functional Training," because one fascial line extends from the bottoms of your feet, up your legs and behind your back and neck, and ends at the forehead. It acts like a rubber band, so when you bend over, you're stretching the entire thing. If you have any knots along the way -- and just about everyone does -- it's harder for your fingers to sink to the floor.

Ideally, the fascia would just glide along the muscles, but whenever you repeat a motion too many times, they stick instead. These adhesions form from patterns of overuse, whether strenuous exercise or lounging on your butt for hours.

They're even caused by wearing shoes and walking only on flat surfaces.

"Your feet are restricted all day long, so you know everyone is going to have problems there," adds Price, whose San Diego office has a pile of rocks for his clients to traverse barefoot.

Hence, a foot massage helps you get closer to touching your toes. A neck rub could do the trick, too. Even more bizarrely, repeatedly raising your eyebrows might give you another half-inch. That one works because we're often communicating more with computer screens than with people. As a result, we keep our faces frozen for much of the day.

Tanya Colucci of Mint Fitness in Washington has been preaching to her clients for years about the benefits of self-myofascial release, which uses balls and other tools to break up these adhesions.

Working out with Colucci involves performing a warm-up that starts with lying on your side, propped up on one arm with your feet on top of a foam roller (a firm cylinder). You gradually shift your weight to make the roller slide up your body at a rate of an inch per second, with 20- to 30-second pauses on tight spots. It's slightly painful while you hold, but when you move the roller past the spot, blood rushes to the area, helping it return to its original state. The idea is to make every exercise you're going to do more effective.

Colucci insists that all of her clients get a foam roller for home use.

"The ones that progress the fastest do it at least five times a week," she says.

The rest treat it like flossing: Even if they're not doing it, they know it's good for them. Her introduction is fairly convincing: The clients do squats, then move a roller along one side of the body and try the squats again.

"I have them notice how much better they feel on that side and how the movement is more fluid," she says.

The results extend far beyond feeling good, adds Price, who worries about the dysfunction we all create by too much sitting with our spines hunched over, chests tight, hip flexors on fire and glutes shut down. After all, being able to touch your toes isn't just about impressing people in yoga class. It's about being able to pick things off the ground and teaching our bodies to move the way they're supposed to.

Although these self-myofascial release techniques have been around for decades, they have only recently caught on in the personal-training realm.

The problem?

"That's not going to help me lose 20 pounds for my wedding," says Price, parroting what clients often say when he suggests spending a chunk of a session lying on a foam roller.

The situation is changing as more people seek help not just for weight loss but also for pain.

Aches and injuries are precisely why a dozen women gathered recently at Fitness on the Run in Alexandria for a workshop introducing the MELT Method, a new program that promises to improve flexibility and mobility, which will be the basis of a regular class. You can guess what they did. They took balls, rolled their feet around on them and then checked to see how much better they were at touching their toes.

And the crowd went wild.

