



On the Mat

by Christa Rypins

Releasing your hamstrings without stretching them: Yoga meets the Franklin method

People often equate flexible hamstrings with enlightenment, and thus feel bad if their hamstrings are tight. In my experience, tight hamstrings are a sign of tightness elsewhere in the body.

There are many causes of muscular tightness—posture, diet, stress levels, physical activity, beliefs about yourself, etc. On a physical level, classical contributing factors to tightness in the hamstrings tend to be 1) the quads (the front of the thighs); 2) the hip rotators (the bottom of the butt); 3) the gluteus group (the upper section of the butt); 4) the adductors (inner thighs); and 5) the iliopsoas (the deep hip flexors attaching the legs to the pelvis and spine). In my experience, releasing these other muscle groups can have a direct and dramatic effect on the hamstrings.

Hamstring Stretches from Front to Back

Let's experiment with the effect of stretching the quads on the hamstrings.

1. Standing up, do a forward fold and feel where your hamstrings tighten.
2. Stand up and stretch the quads by balancing on one leg while bending your other leg behind you and grasping the foot; keep the standing knee and bent knee aligned rather than pulling the bent leg out behind you. Be sure to hang out in the stretches for at least a minute to give the fibers time to release their holding.
3. Fold forward and feel the difference between the hamstrings in the two legs.
4. Stretch the quads on the second leg, then feel for the difference in the hamstrings. This is a good example of how we can get to the back through the front.
5. Next, stretch the adductors by doing a side-angle stretch. Activating the feet will awaken the muscles up into the groin, making the stretch more effective. Press into the ball of the big toe, the ball of the baby toe, and both sides of the heels.
6. After completion of the first side, feel for the benefits in the hamstrings.
7. Repeat on the second side.

The hip rotators can have a pronounced effect on the hamstrings, both negative and positive. If the rotators at the bottom of the butt are tight, or weak, that tightness is guaranteed to echo into the hamstrings. Stretch the hip rotators practicing Pigeon or a figure-4 stretch. Muscles are 72 percent water and respond well to fluid imagery so, while stretching, picture your fluid muscles sliding apart. Follow the same pattern—after stretching the first side, feel the effect on your hamstrings, then do the other side. Next stretch the gluteus with a standing Half Moon Pose, and/or lunge with the back knee lifted. Again, feel for the effect on the hamstrings. Finally, move your attention inside to the iliopsoas. Here is an exercise for accessing this area; for additional stretches for the iliopsoas, ➔ [read my series in the Spring and Summer 2011 issues of the *Yoga Bulletin*.](#)

The Deep Center Line Release

1. Take a 4-inch ball or rolled-up washcloth. Lie on your belly, and place the ball or towel in your lower abdomen directly above your pubic bone. Breathe and soften around the ball as much as possible. Soften the tongue and jaw. Soften the butt. The ball is softening the connective tissue around the lower section of the psoas and the iliacus. Remember, the body responds to fluid imagery; try visualizing the muscles softening over the ball like hot fudge melting over ice cream, or the fibers softening like butter sitting out on a warm day. You can get deeper into the iliacus by moving the ball farther to one side or the other. Breathe and soften. Connective tissue takes longer to stretch than muscle so take at least two minutes in this position.
2. Move the ball to the second location, between the navel and the floor. Now you are in the middle section of the psoas. In my experience, whichever section of the psoas is tightest, its release will have the most profound effect on the hamstrings. (The ball might be pressing into the aorta, the main artery bringing blood from the heart to the extremities, which will cause you to feel your heartbeat. If this bothers you, you can adjust the ball slightly to the right to get away from the aorta, which is on the left side of the navel. This can be an interesting opportunity to remember when all life once came to us through the umbilicus.)
3. After at least two minutes, or when you feel the tissue soften, move the ball to the final location, above the navel and below the ribs in the solar plexus—the grand finale of the Deep Center Line Release. Once again, breathe and soften. On an inhalation, the diaphragm presses into the ball, which creates a type of isometric contraction for the diaphragm. This means the diaphragm can release more on the exhalation, moving up toward the heart. The deeper release of the diaphragm on the exhalation does two things: 1) as the diaphragm moves up, there's room for the ball to sink in, softening the top of the psoas, and 2) it assists the diaphragm fibers in sliding apart so a greater relaxation/exhalation can occur (especially beneficial for those with asthma). A more fluid and flexible diaphragm will effect the hamstrings positively, and the converse is also true—a tight diaphragm will impede hamstring mobility. Experiment in this position for at least two minutes.

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4. Take the ball away and notice how good it feels to breathe with the increased space. Press into Child's pose and notice how foldable you are.
5. Finally, stand up, perform a forward fold and feel for the benefits in your hamstrings.

In the future, as you practice, experiment with the order in which you release the muscle groups to see if you can identify the more dominant perpetrator of hamstring tightness for you. In my classes, I save hamstring stretches for last, not only for the reasons mentioned previously, but also because hamstring tightness seems to bring up self-judgment for many of us. After the other muscle groups are warm, the hamstrings open with more ease, and softness with the self seems to come more easily, too.

Cueing the Pelvis to Strengthen the Core, Lengthen the Iliopsoas, and Free the Hamstrings

When the iliopsoas is tight, the pelvis can get pulled into one of two positions: a "tucked" position, known anatomically as a posterior tilt, or an "arched" position, known as an anterior tilt. Both of these postural holdings create hamstring tightness, and can be released with yoga by using precise pelvic cueing to return the pelvis toward neutral.

In the Franklin Method, we say, "Embodying the bones creates balance in the surrounding muscles." Here's how we can use yoga to accomplish this.

1. Come into any kind of Warrior I pose, kneeling or standing. Experiment with creating the pose by pulling the sit bone of your back leg forward. Breathe and practice that for a few breaths.
2. Change the cue to pulling your tailbone forward. Hold that for a few breaths, then go back to pressing the sit bone forward. What difference do you feel? When I cue from the sit bone, my psoas stays relaxed and continues to release into the stretch. Conversely, when I cue from the tailbone, the psoas engages and resists the full stretch, so the hamstrings don't get an associated benefit.
3. Next come into a prone position for Sphinx or Baby Cobra. Activate your legs, pull your armpits to your hips to activate your core, and experiment with the difference between pulling the pubic symphysis toward the floor (which moves the sit bones), and pulling the tail forward. When the pose is cued from the tail, the psoas tightens, restricting the sacral iliac (SI) joint. Cueing from the pubis/sit bones unbinds the SI joint, releases the psoas, and creates a corresponding release for the hamstrings.
4. Finally, come into the Bridge pose with a block or mini ball between your knees. Keep the Bridge pose small to practice this bone awareness. On an exhalation, squeeze the block, reaching the sit bones toward the knees and sinking the ribs toward the floor. Practice for five breaths. This puts the stretch in the bottom of the hip flexors, lengthening the often overlooked lower fibers of the psoas.

We have applied these cueing principals to three poses, but you can apply them to any movement or pose. To be clear, it is not that the tailbone does not move—it does. But initiating the movement with the pubis or sit bone allows the tail to move and rotate as it is designed to, which unfetters the SI joint, reduces tension in the iliopsoas, and shows up downstream in the hamstrings.

Another Franklin Method adage is, "If we stretch and exercise crooked, we will get stronger and more flexible crooked." Working with aligning the bones in this way assists the body in finding its way toward neutral so we become stronger and more flexible in alignment, making the rewards of yoga even deeper. ■

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