

Preventing Injuries With Yoga: The Example of Tight Hamstrings

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In an average year, 60-65% of runners are affected by injuries that interfere with their ability to run. Research shows that half of these injuries are a recurrence of a prior injury rather than a new problem. This recurrence suggests that many injuries are due to ongoing problems, such as training errors and/or physical imbalances, rather than short-term problems such as fluid intake or bad luck. It also suggests that the key to injury prevention may lie in strengthening and balancing injury-prone areas to reduce the risk of re-injury.

In my opinion, Iyengar yoga is better than any other style of yoga for addressing problems that lead to injuries among athletes. The Iyengar style of yoga is based on a principal of balance between strength and flexibility. Students of Iyengar yoga build endurance while attending to physical alignment and the subtle aspects of body and breath. Iyengar classes teach you about the anatomical and physiological aspects of yoga poses. This instruction allows you to explore the inner structures of your body to discover your particular areas of strength, weakness, tightness and misalignment. Props such as chairs, blocks, blankets, belts and ropes are used to align your body for maximum benefit and improvement. This individualized approach means that no matter what your imbalances or limitations are, Iyengar yoga can teach you how to move in a way that is appropriate for your body. It also means maximum personal improvements in the physical factors that affect your training and performance.

Hamstring injuries offer a perfect example of the use of Iyengar yoga to address problems. Hamstring pulls are a common running injury that is caused by insufficient flexibility and mobility. The potential negative effects of hamstring inflexibility cannot be overemphasized. Hamstring muscles cross two major joints: the hips and knees. Because of this, they directly affect the health of these joints. They also significantly affect the spine and posture through their attachment at the ischial tuberosity of the pelvis. Tightness in the hamstrings can therefore affect the back, hips and knees causing problems in your stride and performance. Problems in the hamstrings can build up over time and become so severe that running becomes impossible. As many runners know, hamstring injuries can result in weeks of down-time before you can run without pain. For this reason, the hamstring muscles are probably the most important muscles to warm-up and stretch before a workout.

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Poses for Tight Hamstrings



Hamstring Stretch

- Lie on your back with your right leg bent and right foot on the floor.
- Bend the left knee toward the chest, gently holding the left knee with both hands.
- Exhale and straighten the leg without lowering the knee.
- Repeat 10 times, holding the stretch for at least 20 seconds on each leg.

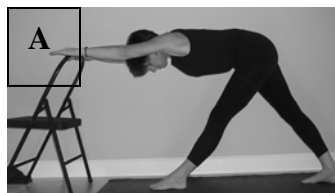
This stretch prepares the hamstrings for Supta Padangusthasana (see below).



Supta Padangusthasana (Reclining Hand-To-Foot Pose)

- Lie on your back and place a belt around the ball of your left foot. Keep the right foot straight.
- Exhale and extend through the heel as you straighten the left leg. Use the leverage of your arms to lift your leg as high as possible.
- Hold the stretch for 15 to 20 seconds on each leg.

This pose stretches the hamstrings, calves and Achilles tendon while supporting the back.



Parsvottanasana (Intense Side Stretch)

- If your hamstrings are very tight, start by standing in front of a chair, wall or table (A).
- Place your left foot forward and step your right foot back 3 – 3 ½ feet at a 75 degree angle. Be sure that the heel of your left foot is in line with instep of your right foot.
- Square your hips toward the chair and on an exhalation, bend forward and place your hands on the chair.
- Press into the feet, relax in the abdomen and lengthen through the spine.
- Hold the stretch for 10 to 15 seconds on each side.
- When your hamstrings have stretched, you can fold all the way forward and bring your hands to the floor (B).

This pose warms the ankles, knees and hips. It also stretches the hamstrings and strengthens the inner thighs.