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Training Peaks

WHY, WHEN AND HOW TO USE A FOAM ROLLER

In recent years, foam rolling has gone mainstream. Once a self-massage technique used only by professional athletes, coaches, and therapists; foam rolling is now an everyday practice for people at all levels of fitness. There is a reason for the popularity of this self-massage technique: it is simple and it works!

With the (usually foam-based) cylindrical muscle rollers now widely available in a variety of design and firmness levels, there is never been a better time to start. Here is what you stand to gain if you haven't tried foam rolling, and how to do it better if you've already started.

What is Foam Rolling?

Foam rolling is also called [myofascial release](#). But what is fascia? And why do you want to “release” it? Fascia is the thin tissue that connects our muscles. Think of it as your body's internal packaging—it helps muscle groups cooperate as integrated units. When it is healthy, fascia is flexible, supple and glides smoothly over your muscles. But binding in your fascia can form for a variety of reasons, such as muscle injury, inactivity, disease, inflammation, or trauma. Even just sitting at a desk all day can get your fascia “gummed up” and stiff.

Why is foam rolling so beneficial for endurance athletes?

When you are doing a highly repetitive movement such as running, swimming, or biking, you're typically overusing some muscles and underusing others—especially if things aren't in perfect balance. The muscles that get overused tend to get tight, and a tight muscle doesn't function properly. When you foam roll, you can help improve symmetrical (ideal) muscle function by ‘resetting’ tight areas. By taking a few minutes around each workout (and each day if necessary), you can help prevent imbalances and overuse injuries.

How to Foam Roll?

It is better to be too soft than too hard. It might feel tender as you roll through the tissue but it should not be agonizing. To keep it simple and systematic, I like to divide the muscle that you are rolling into three segments – bottom, middle and top. Give each section a few passes up and down, move onto the next one, and then finish off by giving the entire length of your muscle a pass over.

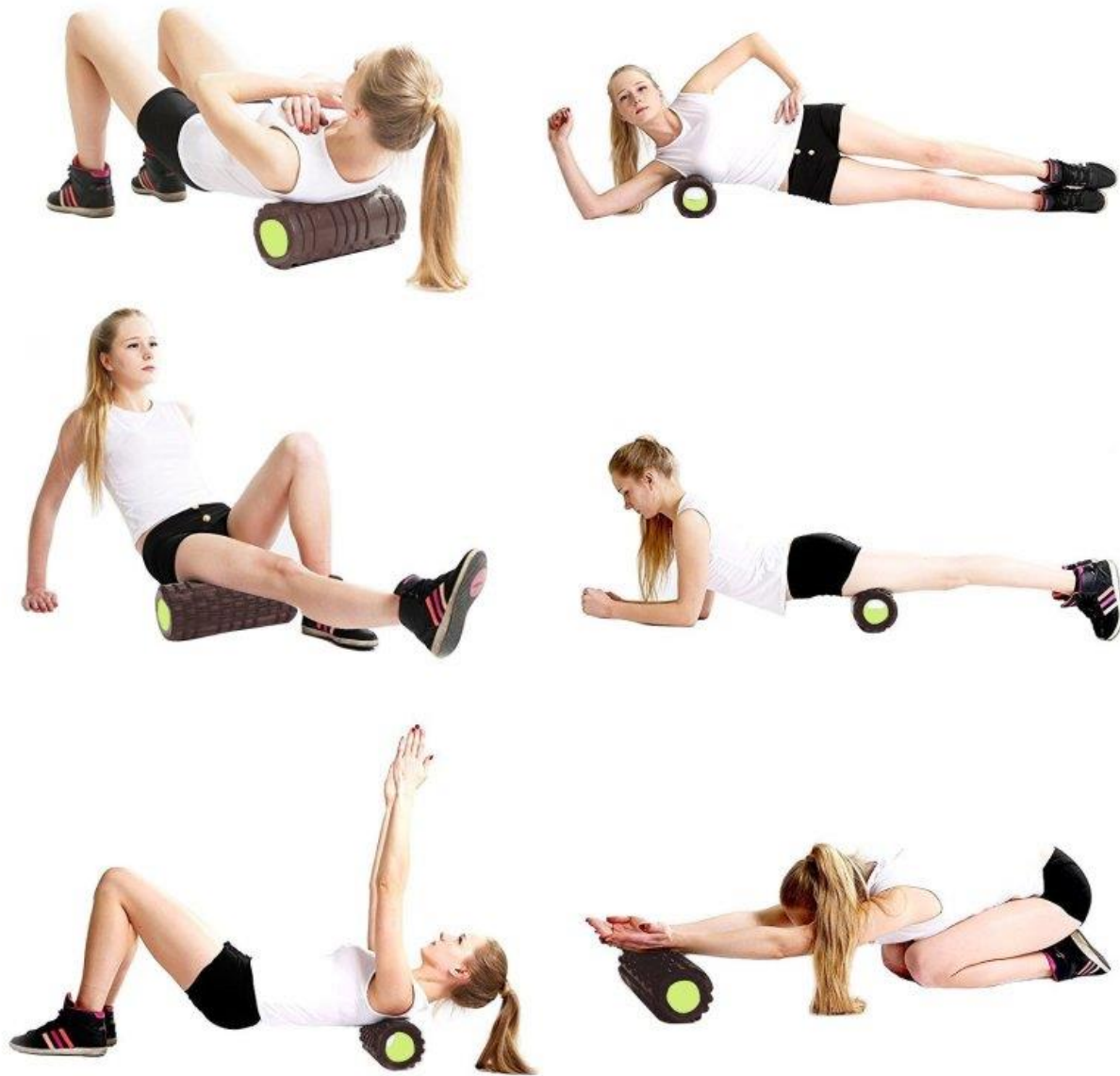
With each pass through the muscle group, you can then work deeper into the tissue for more release. It is very possible to find several trigger points throughout your body. When you hit a spot that is especially painful or tight, pause here and try to relax. Give it time and the muscle should release – anywhere from 5 – 30 seconds. For more precise areas, try something like a lacrosse ball or tennis ball. As you get to know your body, and how it responds to foam rolling, you may go shorter or longer as needed.



When to Foam Roll

Foam rolling can be performed prior to and after your workouts. Before exercise, rolling will increase tissue elasticity, range of motion and circulation (blood flow). This can help you move better during your workout and protect you from injury.

Foam rolling post-workout is a great way to enhance recovery. Focus on all of the major muscles you just worked, with an extra emphasis on the areas that feel problematic. By stimulating blood flow in affected areas, you will dramatically increase oxygen to your sore muscle fibers and reduce recover time. In fact, most elite athletes get massages regularly for this reason. While nothing can quite replicate a good sports massage, you can enjoy many of the same benefits at home (or between massages) with a foam roller.





BETWEEN A ROLLER AND A HARD PLACE

One important aspect to consider is density, or how firm it is. Foam rollers are often color-coded according to level of firmness. The scale can vary by brand but it typically follows the following color guide:

- **White:** The least dense option, making it the softest of the bunch. These are often a great choice for those just getting started with foam rollers.
- **Colors:** Foam rollers that are colorful typically have a medium density. These are a good choice if you're looking for a firmer amount of pressure. You may see a variety of colors including blue, green, red, orange and more.
- **Black:** As firm as it gets, as these are the densest option.

FOAM ROLLER SIZES

You will also have to think about what size foam roller is best for you.

Long rollers are typically around 36" long and great to use on larger areas of the body, like the back, quads and hamstrings. If you are looking to target smaller parts of the body, look for a shorter foam roller. These are normally around 24" or smaller in length, and are great to use on your arms, calves and other small areas.

Most rollers are between 5" - 6" in diameter, which allows for a more controlled rolling experience.

SMOOTH VS. TEXTURED

Now it is time to consider the roller's surface. When purchasing your new foam roller, you have two surface options to choose from: smooth or textured.

When it comes to smooth foam rollers, these can be a great introduction to rolling. The smooth surface allows for an even pressure across the length of the massage. A smooth foam roller will not be as intense as a textured roller, which makes it a good stepping stone for beginners. Also, because of less engineering, smooth rollers will typically be less expensive than their ridged counterparts.



ITB Roll

Lay on the roller so the roller sits under the side of the leg just below the hip joint. Support the weight of your body on your hands, and opposite leg (which is crossed out in front of the leg on the roll). This exercise helps loosen up your Ilio-Tibial Band (ITB) which runs down the outside of your leg from your hip to your knee. Roll back and forth from below the hip until just above the knee.



TFL Roll

Lay on your side so that the roller is placed just above the hip joint (NOT on the hip joint). The tensor fasciae latae (TFL) is a muscle that runs from the hip to the top of the pelvis. You will not have to roll much with this exercise, as it is a small muscle. If you set the roller just above the bony part of the hip and below the pelvis you should be in the location of the TFL.



Calf Roll

Support your weight with your hands on the floor and one calf on the roller. Do not sit on the floor. Using your upper body roll from your heel to the top of your calf. Both knees bent and legs up so that your thighs are at 90 degrees to your body. Slowly lower one leg towards the floor. Without touching the floor, lift the leg back to the starting position and alternate legs. Maintain the neutral spine position throughout the entire exercise.



Back Stretch

Sit on one end of the roller and lay back so that your head is supported on the roller, and your spine is in line with the roller. Bend knees to provide balance. Bring your arms straight up so that they are pointing towards the ceiling. Now drop your arms over your head and allow gravity to cause a stretch. This will stretch your latissimus dorsi muscles and help extend your thoracic spine.



Thoracic Spine Mobility

Lay on the roller so that your spine is perpendicular with the roll, bend knees and lift hips off ground while maintaining a flat body position. Roll back and forth from the top of the shoulders (NOT on the neck) down to the bottom of the rib cage. This exercise will help improve the mobility of the thoracic spine by encouraging movement in each segment.



Glute Roll

Sit on the roller with your legs slightly extended in front of you and your body leaning back. Placing your weight on either your left glute or your right glute, roll across the gluteal muscles. Take longer through the tighter areas.



Quad Roll

Lay face down on your elbows with the roller under your quadriceps (the front of your upper leg). Roll from the bottom of your pelvis to above your knee. (NOT over your knee!)



Chest Stretch

Sit on one end of the roller and then lay back. Your head should be resting on the roller and your knees should be bent with your feet flat on the floor shoulder width apart to provide balance. Bring both arms up in front of you and bend both elbows to 90 degrees, forearms will be parallel to the ground. Keeping your elbows bent, open your arms out to the sides and relax. Let gravity stretch the muscles of your chest and shoulders.



Abdominal Strengthening (Beginner)

Sit on one end of the roller and lay back so that your head is again supported on the roller. Reach your arms out to each side like a 'T'. Have your knees shoulder width apart and bent approximately 90 degrees with your feet flat on the ground. Begin by tightening your stomach muscles trying to pull your belly button to the back of your spine without tucking your tailbone under. Maintaining the neutral position of the spine slowly lift one knee up till your thigh is perpendicular to the ground then lower the leg back to the starting position. Alternate legs until fatigued.



Abdominal Strengthening (Advanced)

Lay in the same body position as in the beginner exercise, maintaining the neutral spine position. Begin with both knees bent and legs up so that your thighs are at 90 degrees to your body. Slowly lower one leg towards the floor. Without touching the floor, lift the leg back to the starting position and alternate legs. Maintain the neutral spine position throughout the entire exercise.



A.



B.

For both abdominal exercises:

- A) Increase difficulty to an intermediate level move your arms to your sides
- B) For even more difficulty reach your arms directly over your head

