

# Self-Myofascial Release

By Tiffany Cruikshank

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**M**yofascial release\* is a term broadly used to imply work on the muscles and fascia to eliminate pain and restore motion. Treatment usually uses sustained pressure into myofascial restrictions with or without movement to allow the connective-tissue fibers to reorganize themselves in a more flexible, functional fashion.

Fascia is very densely woven connective tissue that covers and connects every muscle, bone, nerve, artery, and vein as well as all of the internal organs. The fascial system is not just a system of separate coverings; it is actually one structure that exists from head to foot without interruption. Hence, you see that each part of the body is connected to every other part by the fascia, like the yarn in a sweater. Since the fascia surrounds and attaches all these structures, it creates a strong, supportive function, much like the wires of the tent that hold the tentpoles, or the bones, in place.

When you connect the fascia along lines of movement, our bodies are like puppets pulled back and forth by strings or lines of fascia that coordinate the muscles to work in a combined effort. Many of these lines of fascia overlap to create a multidimensional model of movement that allows us to be fully mobile. The fascia has the ability to stretch and move without restriction, however, since the muscles all go in different directions, they must be able to glide over and past each other. The problem occurs when the muscles and/or nerves become tethered together by bound-up fascia or scar tissue from surgery, injuries, inflammation, repetitive movements, or poor posture, causing the fascia to become less pliable. It then becomes tight and restricted, a source of tension for the whole body. Traumas, such as a fall, whiplash, surgery, poor posture, and repetitive-stress injuries, have cumulative effects on this fascial system. The changes they cause in the fascial system can influence the biomechanics, function, and pain of the rest of the body. The fascia can then exert excessive pressure, producing pain or restricting movement as well as affecting our flexibility, stability, and our ability to withstand stress and strain.

Our structure can actually change slowly over time to accommodate our poor movement or lack of movement patterns so that rather than being an unchangeable bony structure, we are more like a malleable piece of clay that can slowly change over time, for better or for worse. This is why yoga is so crucial to optimal health; not only does it teach better posture and movement patterns, but it also teaches elasticity in the soft tissues and suppleness around the joints, along with core stability and balance. When the problem is more serious, I recommend soft-tissue treatments like Active Release Techniques, Rolling, or other deep-tissue treatments to speed up the soft-tissue changes. However, yoga in itself will slowly restrain the soft tissue and remodel the structure of our bodies over time with mindfulness.

The following myofascial release techniques are meant to help you begin to remodel your structure and to provide effects that can also supplement your physiology. For instance, better posture can increase respiration and oxygen intake and, therefore, perfusion of the tissues by this well-known therapeutic agent. Taking compression off the abdominal muscles and gently stimulating the organs can have profound effects on your ability to process and eliminate toxins as well. Just being able to change your perspective and having enough to have a powerful effect on depression and anxiety. These and many others are reasons to be aware of the effects that your posture, exercise, and mindset play in creating optimal health.

## Myofascial Release for the Hips

Below are some techniques using tennis balls—easy to pack and take along with you on long trips—for releasing glutes and hip rotators that are tight and often the culprit of low back pain, knee injuries, and poor ankle biomechanics. This one takes some playing with to learn how to leverage the body weight to get deeper into the hips but is extremely powerful when used properly. Try your best to relax; don't clench or grip and think you're helping yourself because it's more painful that way. Part of this exercise is retraining the muscles to learn how to relax properly so that they can also contract more efficiently when they need to.

- 1 (A) Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet on the floor. (B) Lift the hips, and place the tennis balls on each side of the top of the sacrum, just off the bone. (C) Relax completely for 1 to 2 minutes by using the weight of the body to relax the muscles, then move the balls down a few inches at a time and repeat. (D) Next, bring the balls back to where you started, and move the balls about 2 inches wider and relax, moving down a few inches at a time, stopping at the tender or tight areas for at least 1 to 2 minutes. As you get better at knowing your hips and your tight spots, you can go right to the tight areas. Or play with moving the knee down to one side so the knee comes out to the side toward the floor, then maybe do both legs together as well as rolling onto one side at a time.
- 2 (A) Lie on your back, and bend your knees to place your feet on the floor. Make sure you have some room to move around here. (B) Lift the hips, and place the tennis balls on each side of the sacrum a couple of inches off the bone. (C) Take your right ankle and place it on your left knee so that the right knee moves away from you, then flex your right foot, hold, and try to relax into it. If you want more, lean onto the lifted-leg side so the knee comes toward the ground. (D) Place both feet back on the floor, and then move the balls wider or lower until you find a tender or tight spot, then repeat, relaxing into the tender areas for at least 1 to 2 minutes. Repeat on the other side. When you get better at this one, you can do the same thing with the knees bent, feet together, and lifting the feet off the floor so that the weight rests over the hips on the tennis balls.

These can be a little tricky to find by reading about it, but remember, it's simply a practice of looking and finding what's there. If all else fails, just roll around until you find some tension, and then hold and try to ease into it.

Happy rolling!

*Tiffany Cruikshank, acupuncturist and yoga teacher at the Nike World Headquarters in Oregon, is an internationally known yoga and wellness expert, and author of *Optimal Health for a Vibrant Life: A 30-Day Program to Detoxify and Replenish Body and Mind*.*

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