

Body Work

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The Foam Roller By Kathleen Trotter A Runner's Best Friend

EVER BEEN AT THE GYM and wondered about the function of that cylindrical foam object that looks like a three-foot-long piece of cannelloni pasta? Well, it's called a foam roller and should be considered a runner's best friend. The roller can be used to release tight muscles, strengthen your ankles, improve muscle awareness, challenge balance and stability and increase core strength to prevent running-related back pain. Here's how to use it:

Roll out and
release tight
muscles
Exercises for
self-massage



IT band release

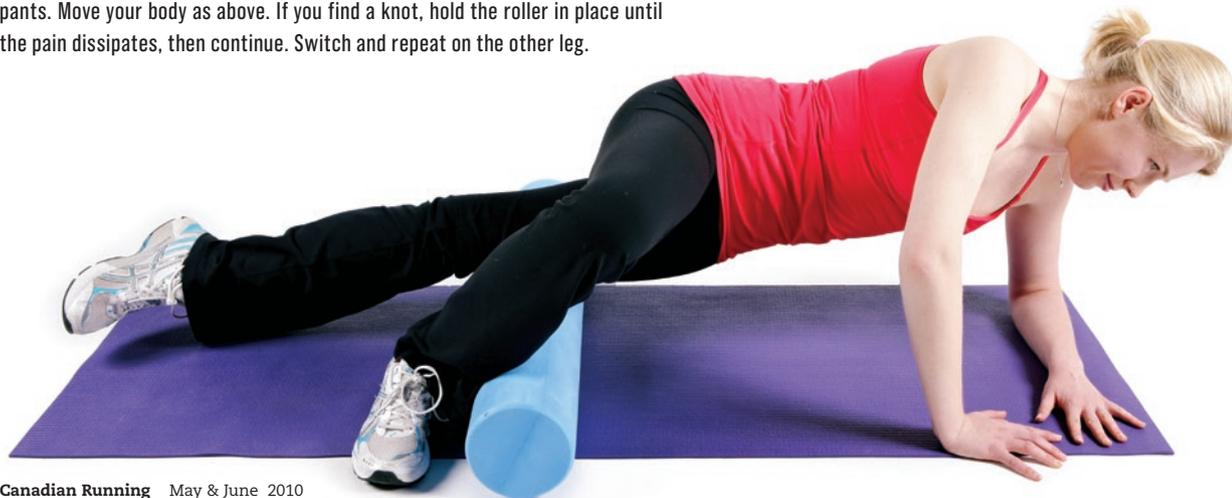
To target your IT band, lie on your left side and support your body with your left arm. The right leg is bent and crossed over your body with the foot on the floor. Place the roller horizontally under your thigh. Using your left arm and right leg, propel your body up and down along the foam roller causing the roller to massage your left leg from your hip to your knee. Whenever you feel a knot along your leg, stop and allow the roller to put pressure on that spot. Hold for 30 seconds and then continue to roll.

Lateral quadriceps release

To target the lateral quadriceps, keep the body in the same position but lean slightly forward so the roller contacts your leg just in front of the seam of your pants. Move your body as above. If you find a knot, hold the roller in place until the pain dissipates, then continue. Switch and repeat on the other leg.

“Wake up” the deep abdominal muscles

Because it's unstable, the foam roller forces the core to engage. This is, in part, because when we work out on unstable surfaces, the nervous system is “turned on.” The nervous system allows our brain to communicate with our body and gives it orders to activate certain muscles. Therefore, turning on the nervous system will help our bodies learn to communicate with sleeping muscles, like the deep abdominals. This “waking up” of the deep core is especially important for people with lower back pain. Often, this pain is more of a muscle recruitment issue than a strength issue: the brain does not know how to send orders to the transverse and multifidus muscles of the deep core. Try the following exercises to challenge your balance, wake up your nervous system and help recruit your deep core muscles.





First: Breathe

Lie on the floor with the roller positioned lengthwise under your back and take a deep breath. Breathe three-dimensionally by taking the air equally into your stomach, side and back ribs, paying close attention to the air entering the back ribs. As you exhale, imagine you are doing up the zipper on jeans that are slightly too tight and pull your abdominals away from the teeth of the zipper. To get the zipper to the top of the jeans, activate all the low abdominal muscles from your pubic bone to your belly button, being careful not to push out or brace your abdominals. Don't let your superficial abdominal muscles do the work: engage the deep muscles. Maintain deep abdominal activation throughout the exercises.

Strengthen your ankles

As a runner, you should train your brain to send signals simultaneously to the muscles of both the core and the ankle to more realistically mimic the demands on the body in outside running conditions. You can train your brain to efficiently send simultaneous signals to the core and ankle by doing theraband ankle exercises while lying on the roller. Traditional strength programs often ignore the small stabilizing muscles of the foot and ankle. For runners, this can be particularly dangerous because the foot is how the body interacts with the running surface. The foot and ankle send constant information to the brain about the surfaces you are standing, walking or running on. With this information, the body stays balanced, negotiates uneven surfaces and transfers ground reaction forces up through the entire body.

How to perform the exercise:

Lie with your back on the roller and your right leg straight up in the air. Take a theraband and place it around the ball of your right foot, holding the ends of the theraband in your hands. Pull the toes on your right foot towards your chest and then push your toes away from you. Think about moving through the entire foot. Do 15 reps and then switch and repeat on your left leg. Although you have started this exercise with your elbows on the ground, you can increase the challenge by lifting up one or both of your elbows. **R**

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Second: Add Leg Movement – Toe Taps

Continue to lie lengthwise on the roller with feet on the ground and arms by your side. Take a deep breath. As you exhale, use your abdominals (not your leg muscles) to bring your right leg up to a tabletop position (90 degree angle at your hip, knee bent). Inhale again and at the next exhalation, lift the left leg up to meet the right leg at tabletop position. Keep your spine stable as you lower one leg and then the other to the ground and back up to the tabletop position. Make the abdominals do all the work, as you imagine your legs floating through the air – and make sure you breathe.



Note:
Rollers come in different densities. The denser the roller is, the more intense the massage will be. To ensure it has the intensity level you want, make sure you test it out before you buy it.