

## HEALTH

# Simple secret helps you touch your toes

## Tennis ball trick loosens knots in fascia

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I've discovered the secret to touching your toes. It's a tennis ball. You don't need to throw it, hit it or catch it. You just need to roll it under each foot for a few seconds. Then put it aside, bend down again and you're guaranteed to reach a smidge closer to the ground.

Feel free to try it. When you're done gasping, we'll continue.

Is it magic? Nope, it's anatomy, as I learned recently at the IDEA Personal Trainer Institute in Alexandria, Va., where twice I saw presenters show off this nifty trick, and twice the audience went wild. That's because even among the gym crowd, most people don't know much about the fascia, the connective tissue that surrounds our muscles. And they know even less about how to manipulate it to improve movement patterns.

The ball trick works, explains Justin Price, the author of "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Functional Training," because one fascial line extends from the bottoms of your feet, up your legs and behind your back and neck, and ends at the forehead. It acts like a rubber band, so when you bend over, you're stretching the entire thing. If you have any knots along the way — and just about everyone does — it's harder for your fingers to sink to the floor.

Ideally, the fascia would just glide along the muscles, but whenever you repeat a motion too many times, they stick instead. These adhesions form from patterns of overuse, whether strenuous exercise or lounging on your butt for hours.

They're even caused by wearing shoes and walking only on flat surfaces.

"Your feet are restricted all day long, so you know everyone

is going to have problems there," adds Price, whose San Diego office has a pile of rocks for his clients to traverse barefoot.

Hence, a foot massage helps you get closer to touching your toes. A neck rub could do the trick, too. Even more bizarrely, repeatedly raising your eyebrows might give you another half-inch. That one works because we're often communicating more with computer screens than with people. As a result, we keep our faces frozen for much of the day.

At least one trainer at the conference wasn't blown away

by this news. Tanya Colucci, the director of education at D.C.'s Mint Fitness, specializes in improving movement, and she has been preaching to her clients for years about the benefits of self-myofascial release, which uses balls and other tools to break up these adhesions.

Working out with Colucci involves performing a warm-up that starts with lying on your side, propped up on one arm with your feet on top of a foam roller (a firm cylinder). You gradually shift your weight to make the roller slide up your body at a rate of an inch per

second, with 20- to 30-second pauses on tight spots. It's slightly painful while you hold, but when you move the roller past the spot, blood rushes to the area, helping it return to its original state. The idea is to make every exercise you're going to do more effective.

Colucci insists all of her clients get a foam roller for home use.

"The ones that progress the fastest do it at least five times a week," she says. The rest treat it like flossing: Even if they're not doing it, they know it's good for them.