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Keep Your Hips Healthy

Article By: Kyle Stack

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Exercises to prevent injuries that can burden your hips

Healthy hips are essential to a high-quality athletic performance, despite the fact that they're not particularly glamorous. When working out, guys tend to focus on the parts of the body that can be flexed in the mirror, such as the chest, biceps and calves. A closer inspection of the importance of strong, flexible hips might help alter that mindset.

Not only does the hip provide support for the spine, it's also a meeting point for the groin, hamstring and quadriceps muscles.

The importance of the hips as a central point for transferring energy throughout the body should not go overlooked, according to Gary Waslewski, MD, an orthopedic surgeon for the NHL's Phoenix Coyotes and the NFL's Arizona Cardinals.

"If you're weak there or have a deficit, it's going to affect your upper and lower body for any sports activity," Waslewski says. "It may not be as flashy to work on your hips as it is on your biceps, but it's every bit as (if not more) important."

Sports Injuries

Even though hips are associated primarily with lower-body injuries, hip complications can have just as much of an impact on the upper body. Waslewski explains that baseball pitchers' shoulder and elbow injuries can stem from hip trouble. "The big concern in baseball is if you have recurrent hip injuries and then start to lose a little hip rotation and motion, that may affect how the middle of your body rotates, which ends up putting more stress on the shoulder and elbow," Waslewski says.

"Everybody has to realize the importance of the transfer of energy from the legs to the upper body that goes through the core and the hips."

He explained that the ailment, termed "pitcher's groin," is the reason why baseball clubs are so focused on checking for hip range of motion and muscle imbalance.

Steve Smith, PT, DPT, SCS, CSCS, who trains athletes rehabilitating from injuries at Athletes' Performance Institute in Gulf Breeze, Florida, emphasizes that hockey players are also at great risk for groin strains and tears to the labrum, which is the cartilage area around the outside part of the hip socket. The sharp cutting movements they make with unstable support on a slick surface add up to an unusually high amount of hip stress. You might recognize the labral tear as a result of another injury—a condition of hip pain known as a hip impingement. It's what put MLB stars Alex Rodriguez and Chase Utley under the knife preceding the 2009 season.

Hockey and soccer players are just as susceptible to hip impingements, according to Bryan Kelly, who specializes in sports medicine as an

As the manager for performance physical therapy services at Athletes' Performance in Gulf Breeze, Florida, Steve Smith, PT, DPT, SCS, CSCS, trains and helps recreational and professional athletes recover from injuries.

His job requires an extensive knowledge of strength and flexibility exercises. Smith offers the following list of stretches to perform in order to strengthen and stretch the hip muscles.

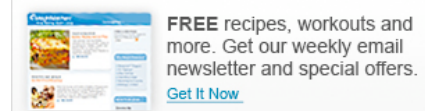
According to Smith, a person places two to three times his or her body weight on the hips for every step taken while walking. That ratio jumps to seven to nine times the body weight for every stride taken while running. The disparity in those figures arises simply from the fact that whenever a foot hits the ground with more force, more force will be sent up through the body. Smith points out that a football player at a high-intensity practice can place as much as 12 times his weight on his hips as he moves around.

If you're an athlete, then adopting some of the following exercises can go a long way toward ensuring a healthy pair of hips.

Activation/strength stretches

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orthopedic surgeon at the Hospital for Special Surgery in New York City.

Baseball, soccer and hockey provide at-risk cases because they "require deep flexing across the hip joint," Kelly says. Athletes in those sports make quick, powerful movements that begin by setting a lead foot, then rotating the pelvis. (Think swinging a baseball bat or hockey stick or kicking a soccer ball.)

Kelly clarified that a telltale sign of an impingement is when the sensation of a groin pull or strain or a hip flexor strain persists beyond normal.

"There can be occasional sensations of catching or locking or different jabbing pains into the joint," Kelly says. Surgery is often necessary if pain continues.

Additional Injuries

There are a variety of other injuries to contend with if you don't properly strengthen and stretch your hips. A strain of the hip flexor—made up of three muscles found mostly on the front of the hip, including a quadriceps muscle called the rectus femoris—can be caused by not stretching or simply by overuse, Smith says. Ice and rest are the best treatments.

Hip bursitis is caused by compression of the bursa sac on the outside of the hip. (Bursa sacs can also be found near the shoulder, elbow, knee and heel.) The bursa sac acts as a shock absorber between the surrounding bones and the tendons. Any hard hit to the area or overuse can result in the bursa sac becoming irritated or inflamed. That's when bursitis sets in, according to Smith. Getting rest and taking anti-inflammatories are the prescribed measures for overcoming this ailment. Surgery might be the answer, but only in the most extreme cases.

Waslewski goes back to asymmetrical issues within the hip's muscle groups as the primary reason for many hip ailments. For example, he stated that a figure skater's repetitive movements can result in micro-trauma to an untreated injury, leading to inflamed capsules and serious muscle pulls.

As a result, Waslewski recommends incorporating yoga, Pilates and any other full-body exercise that values balance and flexibility. If anything, your hips will become stronger and more flexible by being exercised outside the weight room. Once they're healthy, you can return to the weights and flex all you want.

About the writer

Kyle Stack is a freelance reporter based in New York City. He has written for MLB.com, SI.com, ESPN the Magazine and MaximOnline.

(exercises for 5 to 10 minutes in order to activate key hip muscles):

Glute bridges—Lie on your back with your feet flat on the ground and squeeze your gluteal muscles while "bridging" up.

Clam shells (External Hip Rotation)—Lie on your side with your hips and knees flexed to around 45 degrees. Take your top knee off the bottom knee like a clam opening up while keeping your knees together.

Straight leg raise (Hip Abduction)—Lie on your side and raise your top leg until the bottom of your foot is facing the ceiling.

Dynamic stretches (movement prep to integrate the previous activation into multijoint patterns):

Leg cradle—While standing, lift one leg and bend it toward your chest, rotating the hip slightly. Smith says this will stretch the deep muscles on the backside of your hip. For the twist, take one hand and put it around your ankle while giving yourself a slight turn of the leg. He says this works not only on single-leg balance but also, if you squeeze the butt cheek of the leg that's on the ground, it'll give you a great all-in-one exercise.

Quad hip flexor stretch & kneeling (Half-Kneeling Glute Activation)—Get into a kneeling position with one knee down and the other bent at 90 degrees. Lean forward to get a stretch on the front side of your back hip—hold it for 3 seconds. Smith explains that the key here is, while getting that stretch on the backside of the hip, you want to tighten your core and squeeze your butt cheek. That's going to get your glute to activate, working as well as stretching the front of your hip.

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