

An Integrated Approach to Increasing Flexibility

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[Triathlete magazine](#)

When we think of movement and strength, we usually think of muscles. While this thought is not wrong it does oversimplify things a little. In fact, it might be better to work our way into the body from the outside.

As much as the muscles are crucial to swimming, cycling and running, fascial tissues are an often-overlooked part of human anatomy--yet they are a fundamental part of what keeps us upright and moving. Fascia is a fibrous structural tissue that envelops the muscles, bones and joints, supporting the body and helping to give shape to the human form.

Some anatomists contend that if you removed the skeleton from a human body, the body would still be able to stand based on the integrity of the fascial system. Along with this structural role, fascia also provide leverage for the muscles to work against.

Superficial and Deep Fascia

The superficial fascia consists of subcutaneous fat and loose connective tissue, which protects and supports blood vessels and nerves. Your superficial fascia can be distinguished by simply grabbing the skin on your arm, for example, and lifting it away from the underlying muscle.

The deep fascia is a little more complex. Deep fascia can be compared to the insulating outer layer found on electrical cords. Each muscle has this type of fibrous sheath containing it, which is why we can see distinct muscle groups when we look at an anatomy diagram. And within each muscle, every muscle fiber has its own fascial covering down to a microscopic level. The collection of these fibers forms tendons at the ends of the muscle, which allows it to attach to a continuation of the fascia that covers the bone, called the periosteum.

The point of all of this is that as much as your muscles might get tight after a tough training session, your fascial tissues are just as likely to become restricted, and they are very adept at maintaining poor postural patterns. So you can stretch until you're blue in the face, but unless you open the container that houses your muscles you're not really getting anywhere.

What Can We Do?

So what can we do about all this? Well, for a start, adequate hydration can make your muscle and fascia more supple and elastic, plus soft-tissue therapies like myofascial massage, rolfing and hellerwork can help to stretch and release the fascia, thus allowing the muscles to expand and lengthen. Some types of yoga that hold the postures until the body releases can also be helpful.

Massage can also be used for breaking up adhesions in tight muscles, which can have the same effect as scar tissue, making the affected tissue less flexible and more prone to tearing. Scar tissue itself can be made less rigid and more supple with regular massage, and in some cases you may be able to learn some self-massage techniques to help the process along.

Finally, trigger points are areas of chronic muscle spasm that can be caused and/or aggravated by fatigue, illness, chill or injury to a muscle or joint. They can decrease muscle strength and function and force the body to compensate. Trigger-point release therapy is a great way to get rid of these trouble spots.

Ian Abbott is a Victoria, Canada-based triathlete and massage therapist who works out of the Cedar Hill Sports Therapy Clinic. In his seven years of practice he has worked with members of Canada's national triathlon, swimming, rowing cycling, and cross-country ski teams. Ian trains with Olympian Samantha McGlone plus Kelly "Mountain Man" Guest under the wise and watchful eye of Cliff English at Competitive Edge Training.