



Feeling Achy? The Body Part You Don't Know You Have

This mystery tissue could be what's making you feel stiff, creaky...and baffled.
By Corrie Pikul



You're Achy, You're Sore, and You Have No Idea Why

It feels like muscle pain, but unlike a tight hamstring that makes you yelp when you stand up, your ache isn't triggered by a particular movement, and you can feel it in different places at various times. The culprit could be your fascia, says Mary Ann Wilmarth, DPT, chief of physical therapy at Harvard University Health Services. This sheet of tissue, made up of densely packed protein fibers, weaves throughout the entire body, and it binds and supports your muscles, bones and even your organs. While bodywork specialists have been passionate about fascia for decades, Wilmarth says it took new research on how fascia and muscles work together (some of it presented at the first international fascia research conference at Harvard in 2007) to get different health pros—from orthopedists to MDs and pain experts to personal trainers—to catch on.

Find Your Inner Feline

You know how your muscles feel cramped and stiff when you wake up in the morning? After a night's sleep (or another long period of inactivity, like a car trip or plane ride), the parts of your fascia that wrap around and through your muscle fibers, which are normally stretchy and flexible, can stick together like previously chewed Hubba Bubba.

The fix: The best way to release the fascia is to slowly and luxuriously stretch out your arms and legs and roll slowly from side to side before getting out of bed. This will gently pull the muscles apart and separate the connecting tissue, says Wilmarth. To get at the fascia in your calves, ankles and arches, sit on the edge of the bed and flex and point your feet before putting the pressure of your weight on them.

Roll It Out Like Bread Dough

Fascia can be finicky: It gets stiff and sticky when you don't move around enough, but it can also get bound up and twisted when you move too much or do repetitive motion or injure yourself through activity, says James L. Thornton, the president of the National Athletic Trainers Association.

The fix: Work out overused sore spots with a foam roller. You've probably seen people at the gym using these things, which look like pool noodles, to stretch their back, hamstrings and the notoriously tight IT band on the outside of the hips,

Thornton says to go slowly, and when you get to a sore spot that feels like a bruise, pause for 15 to 20 seconds. The discomfort should melt away as the fascia softens and the muscles release. If you feel intense pain that doesn't dissipate, Thornton says to stop and consider making an appointment with a physical therapist. At home, you can try a device called [the Stick](#)—instead of laying your body on top of it, you roll it against your muscles. The stick lets you really go deep into your calves, shins and hamstrings, but because it's more rigid than a foam roller, it can feel much more intense (think deep-tissue massage versus regular rubdown).

Stretch It Out

You've heard that before exercising, it's a good idea to do some dynamic stretching that includes swinging your legs and arms to improve your range of motion. This not only benefits your muscles, says Thornton, but it's also a great way to loosen up your fascia. When your muscles stay tight, the fascia clings to them, and both can become rigid over time.

The fix: Take a brisk walk or jog lightly in place, and do some sports-specific moves (for example, leg swings for runners, or shoulder rolls for swimmers). Or try the lazy woman's warm-up: just start your workout, but stay at a slow, easy, I could-do-this-for-hours pace for about five minutes.

Don't Let the Tissues Get "Crunchy"

If you've ever had a shoulder rub and heard something that sounded like crinkling plastic under your skin, that wasn't your imagination—it was probably your parched, stiffened fascia, says Ruth Werner, the president of the Massage Therapy Foundation, who spent decades teaching anatomy and physiology to other therapists. The collagen fibers that make up fascia need to stay supple to work properly, and to slide over and under muscles and other inner-body surfaces.

The fix: One way to keep the fascia hydrated is obvious: drink lots of fluids, says Werner. Another easy (but easily forgettable) way is to make sure we stand up, stretch and flex regularly throughout the day to keep the fascia from locking up. Werner says some research has also shown that rubbing tight areas—as when you get a massage—can boost circulation and warm the fascia, changing the texture to make it even more pliable.

Let the Pros Handle It

Because fascia is so interconnected, snags—or adhesions, as pros call them—in one area can affect other other areas. "Imagine putting on multiple layers of long-sleeve shirts, and then think about how tugging on one of them would cause all of the other shirts to pull and stretch as well," says Cynthia Ribeiro, the president of the American Massage Therapy Association and a massage therapist. She stresses that you can't have healthy muscles without well-cared-for fascia.

The fix: There are different therapeutic methods to address keeping the fascia healthy, from intense, sometimes-excruciating Rolfing to gentle fascial unwinding to myofascial release, which usually involves loading the deeper tissues with force until they start to give. If you're chronically stiff and sore, or you have a muscle injury that just won't heal, consult a specialist to see what would be right for you. Massage therapists like Ribeiro and PTs like Wilmarth have seen clients for whom nothing seemed to work...until a type of fascial therapy helped melt away their pain and stiffness.