

# Unlock your muscle power

Sports massages can help you move better, exercise longer, and recover faster, new science shows. Add the relaxation and de-stress element, and they may just be your secret workout weapon. **By SARA ANGLE**

You put a lot of work into staying in shape. Maybe you HIIT and run. Maybe you flow. Spin, and do as many reps as possible in boot camp class. Whatever your mix, you're likely missing one simple, science-backed way to maximize the benefit you get out of every drop of sweat: Give your body the targeted TLC of a sports massage. "Athletes typically work sports massage into their regimen to reduce muscle soreness and help treat problem areas," says Beth Mignano, a licensed massage therapist who assisted USA Track and Field at the 2012 and 2016 Olympic Games. The idea is less pain, better training—a sound formula for anyone with a fitness goal. "Plus, getting a regular massage—even once a week—is also a great way to develop another level of body awareness," Mignano



says. “When you have greater body awareness, it can serve to guide your training choices: If you feel something outside the norm, you might be able to prevent an injury or improve performance by adjusting a drill, a technique, or your intensity.

But these aren’t run-of-the-mill spa treatments. Sports massages can consist of some heavy-duty manipulation techniques, including deep-tissue work and stretching, so they’re not always relaxing. (Locate a sports massage specialist near you at [FindaMassageTherapist.org](http://FindaMassageTherapist.org).) What therapists are after is creating myofascial release to help you move better—*myo* refers to muscles and *fascial* refers to the continuous elastic sheet of connective tissue, or fascia, that covers them. “Think of fascia like a piece of shrink wrap surrounding your muscles and providing structural support,” says Nina Cherie Franklin, Ph.D., an exercise scientist and a licensed massage therapist in Atlanta. But things like sitting all day, repetitive motions, and even stress can cause it to get tight. “Loosening the fascia lets the therapist help the muscle return to its normal resting length and open the muscle for movement,” says Mary E. Cody, a master licensed massage therapist at Grae Therapy in New York City.

All that might sound a little intense, but the science behind massage can translate to serious gains in your workouts. Here’s why.

**Oxygenated blood is your muscles’ power supply**, and new research suggests that massage can help those fuel lines work better. In a study at the University of Illinois at Chicago, a single 30-minute lower-body massage performed after a leg workout enhanced blood vessel dilation in exercisers for 48 hours. “Blood vessels that function properly are flexible and have the ability to dilate, or widen, on demand when muscle and other tissues are in need of more oxygen and nutrient-rich blood during and after exercise,” says Cherie Franklin, the primary study author. Her findings suggest massage may stimulate those vessels to be at the top of their game so your muscles get max juice just when they need it.

**Boost your circulation**

**Feel less sore**

**Rev up your endurance**

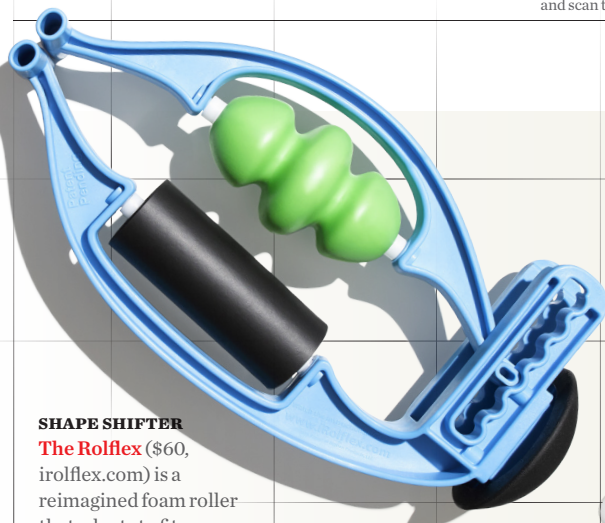
**Move more freely**

**There’s evidence that massage may even spark your muscle cells to go into overdrive:** Researchers at McMaster University in Ontario saw an uptick in the signaling for mitochondria—the powerhouse of your cells—after just one massage. How? “When the proteins involved in sensing the intercellular environment of muscles are altered—most likely from the pressure of a massage—this actually alters your gene expression, temporarily increasing the signal for new mitochondrial growth,” says study author Mark Tarnopolsky, M.D., Ph.D. That’s key, since mitochondria help turn fuel into energy, and the more you have, the greater your endurance capacity. Getting regular massages could potentially change the capacity of your muscles, Dr. Tarnopolsky says.

Not only do postworkout massages pump blood more efficiently, but people who received them reported nearly half the soreness level as those who didn’t get a rubdown, Cherie Franklin’s research found. After a tough workout, there’s an inflammatory response in the muscles you just used—your body speeds blood to patch microtears in those muscle fibers—accompanied by oxidative stress. Too much stress, and your muscles can’t fire as fast, long, or forcefully the next day or two. But massage may dampen the stress effect by lessening the severity of the inflammatory response, she says, ultimately reducing the delayed-onset muscle soreness (a.k.a. DOMS) you typically feel.

**Anyone who’s experienced tight hamstrings** knows that some exercises can be difficult when your movement is restricted. That’s a sign that the fascia sheath is not allowing for a full range of motion in the hamstring, Cody says. By releasing the tight or restricted areas, she says, you’ll improve your flexibility and mobility. That, in turn, might allow you to run with less effort, lift weights with more control, or just exercise a little longer. →





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**The Rolflex** (\$60, irolflex.com) is a reimagined foam roller that adapts to fit every area of your body and hit just the right spots so you can easily give yourself a total-body massage.

## DIY massage

*Can't make it to a therapist? Try these tools postworkout when muscles are warm, or soak in a bath first, Cody says.*



**MAGIC BALL**

The cantaloupe-size **Hyperice Hypersphere** (\$149, hyperice.com) has texturized rubber to work through knots and the added perk of vibration, making it easier to loosen up soft tissue while you roll over your shoulders, back, butt, hamstrings, and feet.



**TOUGH LOVE**

Prefer hard foam rollers to the fluff stuff? **The FasciaBlaster** (\$89, ashleyblackguru.com) is for you. Made from a firm plastic material with specially designed claws, it breaks up the fascia in every part of your body, so going easy is not an option. ★

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