

## **Preventing the Pull: Key Steps to Keeping Hamstrings Healthy**

The thought of it makes every coach, parent and athlete cringe. A player is sprinting down the field and all of a sudden they slow up, grab the back of their leg and painfully limp to the sideline. The infamous pulled “hammy” has become all too common in sports, leaving athletes out of commission for weeks, if not months at a time.

So why are so many athletes coming up lame with injuries due to this curious muscle? There are many reasons, the most common of which are:

*-Improper Conditioning* – Many times hamstring muscles strain because they are just simply too weak to accommodate the demand that is put on them. When an athlete transitions from a jog to a sprint, the majority of muscular effort transitions from the front muscles of thigh over to the back of the thigh, rapidly increasing the stress on the hamstrings. If sprinting and rapid acceleration and deceleration is not trained prior to competing, the muscles are not ready for this demand, and will in turn breakdown. Specific strengthening of the posterior thigh is also often neglected, and in the cases it is done, it is mistakenly done on machines that do not translate strength that can be actually used athletically.

*-Muscular Imbalances* – Research has never been able to conclusively show that “tight” muscles will directly lead to injury. However, it has been shown in many studies that when an imbalance is present from right to left, the likelihood for injury can increase by as much as 4 times. When one hamstring is consistently tight and/or strained, almost always the opposite hip flexor is tight and overactive as well, and must be addressed also to truly resolve the issue.

*-Weak Core Muscles* – The muscles of the trunk, specifically the lower portion of the abdominals and obliques are key stabilizers of the pelvis. When they are weak and fail to do their job, other muscles must compensate, leading to poor muscular coordination and overload.

*So how do we fix this problem???*

If you have noticed, nowhere did I mention that the majority of hamstring pulls were the result of tight hamstrings. Actually, this muscle is often overstretched and lax and continual stretching in that area can in fact make the problem worse.

There are also other factors that go beyond this article that range from poor hydration to muscular trigger points and foot and ankle disorders, just to name a few. However, here are four basic steps that you can take to keep your hamstrings healthy:

1 – *Get Strong* – Specific exercises to address the hamstrings, glutes and lower abdominals, as well as integrated lifts that reinforce proper hip hinging, such as deadlifts and good mornings, will build a strong foundation for the area.

2 – *Proper Progression* – This means don’t roll out of bed and go all out in a 40 yard sprint after taking a few weeks off. Sprint speed and acceleration needs to be gradually increased from rep to rep and from workout to workout.

3 – *Loosen the Hips* – Focus less time on stretching the hamstrings and increase your attention on the hip flexors, hip rotators, calves and lateral hip muscles.

4 – *Get Unilateral* – Most times when hamstrings pull, it is done when lunging (as with baseball pitchers) or sprinting, which are both one-legged movements. Performing exercises and drills that build strength and balance on a single leg will dramatically improve function and durability.

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