

The Toe Touch Challenge :

4 Easy Steps to Improve Your "Bendability"

Eric D'Agati, CPT,PES,CES



In what has always been the benchmark for flexibility (which it really isn't), touching your toes is a skill that alludes many individuals shortly into adulthood, and sometimes even sooner. While not being able to put your fingertips comfortably to your shoes may simply mean you have short arms and long legs (that's a joke...), it also may be implicative of greater movement dysfunctions. Let's look at a few:

1 - **Overstrain on your low back** - Your inability to flex at your hips will in turn cause you to compensate and overflex your back, leaving the discs of your spine very vulnerable to injury.

2 - **Decreased performance** - Whether your an NFL lineman that has to fire out of a 3-point stance or a grandmother that needs to get your crockpot out from the bottom cabinet, your insufficient bending pattern will be inefficient and weak due to the poor motor sequencing of your muscles.

3 - **Wasted time in the gym** - *What if I told you all of those squats and deadlifts you've been working so hard on in the gym were completely ineffective???*

People who can't bend properly also usually have very poor coordination and strength in their glutes (butt muscles). That means whether you're trying to increase your vertical jump or just look good in your jeans, your backside is probably snoozing right through your workouts, making you miss out on all the benefits.

So how can you fix it???

Provided that your deficiency is not due to a spinal abnormality or disc issue, you need to teach your body the proper sequencing and coordination to bend properly. We are all born with this ability, yet lose it over time due to muscular imbalances, poor posture and lack of use and/or overuse.

Step 1 : Clear Out the Junk

When we exercise, play sports or work hard a certain degree of tissue breakdown occurs within our muscle cells. Sometimes the body will lay down inelastic scar tissue in the repair process that can lead to lack of strength and/or flexibility. This can be compounded by trigger points or "knots" that develop from overuse and/or poor posture. These need to be addressed prior to stretching, or we end simply stretching around the adhered tissue. Basically the tight parts stay tight and the loose parts get looser. By using a round Foam Roller, we can perform a self-massage technique to restore optimal tissue quality and circulation. Rollers can be purchased for around \$10 each from most athletic training equipment suppliers.

Even though the hamstrings most often get the blame for being too tight, more often it is the muscles on the front of the thigh and hip that create movement restrictions.

Lay on your stomach with the roller perpendicular to one thigh. The opposite leg should be bent and held up at hip height. Start at the hip and roll down through the thigh. Find the most tender area and stay on that spot for at least 45 seconds. Repeat on the opposite side.



Step 2: Get Tall



Modern society leaves most people relegated to a seated position for the majority of their days. Whether you're a student or office worker, being seated for 7-8 hours per day over time can shorten the hip flexors, the muscles on the front of your hips. Since these muscles fold the hips forward, as well as attach to your lumbar spine (low back), they can cause the hips to tip forward and the spine to shorten when they are too tight.

By getting in a half-kneeling position and becoming as "tall" as possible, we can begin to restore the hip flexors natural length. To get tall, tighten your butt on the side you are stretching, draw in your abdominals and reach your hand towards the ceiling. To enhance the stretch further down the thigh into the "quad" muscles, the back foot may be placed on a ball or chair.

Step 3: Wake Up Your Abs

Part of the issue that restricts people from bending forward properly is that their hamstrings and low back stiffen. These muscles don't always stiffen because they are "tight", but rather that they are tightening to protect and stabilize the pelvis and spine. This is normally the job of the abdominals, but when they become de-conditioned or improperly trained, they lose their function, therefore having the hamstrings and low back compensate.

Lay on your back with one leg running straight up a doorway wall or a bench/table. The other leg should lie parallel on the ground, creating a "L" position. If this is uncomfortable, you can place a roller or towel under the ankle of the lower leg. Initially it may be difficult to have the top leg straight and flat against the wall, but that will improve with practice. Once you are in position, tighten your abdominals and press your low back and tailbone into the ground. This exercise can be progressed by holding the abs tight and then lifting the lower leg to meet the top leg. Repeat 10-15 times, 2-3 times on each leg.



Step 4: Trick Touches

Any movement that we do is stored in our nervous system as a pattern or program, much like a computer file. Every time we repeat that pattern it is updated and becomes more ingrained for the better or for the worse. Also referred to commonly as "muscle memory", this is why practice our golf swing or piano playing, so that each time those movements become more efficient and natural.



If you can not touch your toes, your program for bending has been improperly written over time. By performing the next sequence, we can "trick" your nervous system into a new pattern.

Stand with your toes elevated on a 2x4 or books. Hold a roller or rolled towel between your knees. The feet should be close enough together that you feel slightly bow-legged and pigeon-toed. Bend forward, letting everything relax and reach for the floor. Once you hit your first barrier, squeeze the roll between your knees and forcefully exhale. Once you have hit your limit, slide your hands up the front of the body and reach for the ceiling while taking a deep inhale through the nose. Repeat this process 10 to 15 times. Each time you will notice that you get closer to the floor. If you need to bend your knees slightly to get to the floor, it is OK. Eventually you will be able to keep your knees straight.

Now move across the board and perform the same drill with the heels elevated. After 10-15 repetitions, step off the board and try and touch your toes. If you are not touching your toes, you will be shockingly closer than you ever have been.

Repeat this program daily for 10 days consecutively and enjoy your new "bendability"!

Eric D'Agati is the founder of **One Human Performance**, a Fitness and Wellness company based in Pine Brook, NJ. He specializes in exercise programming for performance enhancement and corrective strengthening and conditioning.
Eric can be reached at **973-882-3366** or at **www.onehumanperformance.com**