



Second Skin

Want the secret to preventing running aches and pains? Get face to fascia with the mysterious substance living just below your surface.

By Amanda McCracken

When it comes to running, one of your most important body parts may be one you've never heard of. Vital to posture, mobility and muscle function, it can help you run faster, while reducing your risk of injury. No, it's not a muscle, a bone or even a tendon—it's your fascia.

FASCIA WHO?

Latin for "bandage," fascia is the connective tissue that envelops and supports your muscles, bones, nerves and organs—kind of like cling wrap. In fact, if everything were to be removed from your body except for your fascia, it is said that your frame would retain its shape.

You can think of fascia as the sea-

weed of your favorite sushi roll. Fascia itself is a continuous web of nerves, blood cells and lymph vessels. While it may sound like a delicate material, fascia has the tensile strength of 2,000 pounds per square inch.

There are three general categories of fascia: superficial, deep and visceral. The superficial layer lies directly below the skin, the deep layer enhances the connection between muscles and bones and the visceral fascia covers and suspends all internal organs. While all three types of fascia are integral to your body's function, it's the superficial layer that can help (or hurt) your running performance.

KEEP YOUR "BANDAGE" FRESH

Damage to the superficial layer of fascia can slow you down and increase risk of injury. Healthy fascia is well hydrated, elastic and easily elongated. Unhealthy fascia, on the other hand, is dehydrated and adheres to other layers, resembling a wrinkled bed sheet. Consider a wetsuit—if you tug hard on the leg, it affects the whole suit. Remember the strength of fascia? Those "wrinkles:" can pull bones out of alignment, trap nerves, reduce muscle length and compromise range of motion.

Injury to one area of fascia can spread to neighboring tissue over time. One of the most common injuries

Tools of the Trade

MYOFASCIAL RELEASE INSTRUMENTS GIVE YOUR FASCIA SOME MUCH-KNEADED RELIEF.

Trigger Point Foot and Lower Leg Kit

This step-by-step system helps you roll your way to pain-free feet, calves, shins and knees. \$110, tpttherapy.com



Pro-Tec Roller Massage

Hold both ends like a rolling pin to target problem areas. A free user's manual guides you through 20 massage techniques. \$30, injurybegone.com



Gaiam Muscle Therapy Foam Roller 36"

Flip on the 25-minute instructional video and glide across this large roller, ideal for large muscle groups. \$35, gaiam.com



among runners is pain at the bottom of the foot. The culprit for this discomfort (called plantar fasciitis) is most often tightness in fascia near the calf, which causes undue stress and pain on the foot's sole. Similarly, runner's knee is often caused by tight fascia along the IT band, quad and hip. Think of a rubber band stretched between two fingers: It won't snap at the spot where it's being pulled, but rather the section

that's most stressed from the stretching. To ensure your fascia's wrinkles won't lead to greater headaches, it's crucial to do some ironing work.

IRON, LADY!

There are a number of ways to ensure your fascia stays healthy—all of which are traditional methods of encouraging flexibility, mobility and tension release. Anatomist Gil Hedly, Ph.D., describes damaged fascia as "fuzz" between our muscles, bones and organs. "Melt the fuzz! Stretch!" he recommends. If you have an injured shoulder, and you are hesitant to move it, more "fuzz" grows and the shoulder feels increasingly stuck. Mix in stretching and yoga to elongate those threads and avoid running injuries.

External pressure in different forms can also aid in promoting fascial health. Deep tissue massage and active release therapy (ART) hone in on specific wrinkles or adhesions in fascia to soften the tissue and increase fluidity. Acupuncture is another modality to consider. Recent studies out of the Southern Medical University in Guangzhou, China have shown that the lines in our fascial network are the original anatomical basis from which acupuncture meridians were developed.

Don't feel like making an appointment? Simple self-massage breaks up fascial adhesions, minus the therapist's fee. Use a massage tool rather than your fingers to increase leverage. For larger areas (quads, hamstrings, IT band), a foam roller or rolling stick will work best. Smaller areas (calves, soles of the feet, hip flexors) benefit from pinpointed instruments such as a lacrosse ball, golf ball or similarly shaped massage tool. Find videos of simple self-massage techniques at womensrunning.com/massage.

Just as the kick wax on cross-country skis allows for gliding in one motion and gripping in another, so do the fascial fibers. If damaged, these fibers don't stretch and hold where they should. To keep the fibers moving in the right direction, try a variety of self-care techniques to prevent injury. ■

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO BE THE BEST *You*

MORE COMFORT



Apply everywhere skin rubs to prevent hot spots, chafing & blisters.

MORE HYDRATION



Carry 16oz of fluid—with room to stash nutrition, ID, keys & race number.

MORE ENERGY



Portable Bloks come in chewable, 33 calorie cubes, making it easy to track caloric & electrolyte intake.

MORE *Me*

13.1

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