

# The Beginner's Guide to Self-Massage

By Laura Newcomer | June 9, 2017

**These simple techniques can improve circulation, ease muscle soreness, and reduce stress in minutes.**

Anyone who's ever had a professional massage can attest to how great you feel afterward. You emerge from the room like you're walking on air. Stress has melted away, and muscle aches and pains are a distant memory. With benefits like that, we all should be getting weekly massages.

Too bad we're all busy—and not made of money.

Enter self-myofascial release, or SMR. Also known as self-massage, this popular physical therapy technique can offer many of the same benefits as a professional session in mere minutes. Plus, you can do it in the comfort of your own home, on your own schedule, with no fees attached—besides an initial small investment in a foam roller, tennis ball, or rolling pin.

## **How Self-Myofascial Release Works**

“Self-myofascial release is the practice of using massage, foam rollers, or tennis balls to improve muscle mobility,” says Lisa Woods, a personal trainer and yoga teacher in Eagle, Colorado. The goal is to relax the fascia (pronounced FAH-shuh), which is a fancy term for the thin connective tissue that wraps and bundles muscles together and can develop knots, or trigger points.

When performed properly, SMR techniques can break down these trigger points and offer serious benefits, including reduced tension in the muscles, enhanced range of motion, improved circulation, and fewer aches and pains, says Chris Kolba, a physical therapist at Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center.

Ready to give it a try? Here's how to target four key areas to relieve a few of the common conditions that older adults or new exercisers may experience. If you're new to self-massage or have difficulty getting on the floor, you may want to try using a tennis ball and rolling pin instead of a foam roller. And if you have had a recent injury or take blood thinners, check with your doctor first.

### **1. Hands and Feet: Increase Circulation and Loosen Stiff Joints**

Getting older often means spending more time sitting, Woods says. This can reduce circulation to our extremities, namely the hands and feet. Luckily, all you need to increase circulation to these areas is a tennis ball.

**Try it:** To target your hands, cover a table with a towel, and place a tennis ball on top of it. Sit at the table with your back straight, and take a slow, deep breath in and exhale fully. Next, place the palm of one hand on the tennis ball, and move it in a circular motion, gently pressing your palm into the ball the whole time. Stretch your fingers over the ball. Roll it back and forth across your whole hand, and up and down along your forearm. Repeat this process for at least two to three minutes per hand.

You can target your feet from the same seated position, Woods says. With a tennis ball on the floor in front of you, place one foot on top of the ball. Gently move your foot forward and backward several times, making sure to press into the ball, arch, and heel of your foot as you do. Finally, stretch your toes by spreading them as far apart as possible. Focus for two to three minutes on each foot.

### **2. Glutes: Relieve Pain in Your Hips and Back**

Foam rolling the glutes is a great way to prevent or relieve [pain in the hips](#), Kolba says, adding that it may also help relieve tension or [pain in your lower back](#). And since research shows more than 80 percent of the population will experience pain in the lower back at some point in their lives, there's a good chance this foam rolling exercise will come in handy.

**Try it:** Sit on a foam roller (available at any sporting goods store) with knees bent and feet flat. Support yourself by placing your hands slightly behind you on the floor. Cross your right ankle over your left leg, just above the knee. The roller should be at the top of your glute muscle but below your lower back. Lean slightly into the leg you're massaging, and slowly roll back and forth several times. Experiment with targeting different areas of the glutes by shifting your body weight from side to side. Repeat this process on the other side.

**Modify it:** If foam rolling on the floor is too difficult or you don't have a foam roller, you can achieve similar benefits with a tennis ball. Lie faceup on the floor, bed, or any other flat surface. Using a softer surface, like the bed, will reduce some of the pressure, which is a great way to regulate the intensity of this exercise. Position the tennis ball in the fleshiest area of one side of your buttocks. Lie here and take several deep breaths for at least one full minute. Repeat this process on the other side.

### 3. Thighs: Reduce Knee Pain

Tight quadriceps can lead to [knee pain](#) and even poor posture. Rolling out the fronts of your thighs can help—whether you use a traditional foam roller or a standard rolling pin like the kind you'd have in your kitchen. Be sure to clean it after use, or buy a rolling pin just for self-massage.

**Try it:** If you're going the foam roller route, lie facedown with the foam roller up near your hips. You can either do one leg at a time or two. Slowly roll yourself forward, pausing every few inches until the roller is about one inch above your knee (or knees). Reverse the movement to return to the starting position.

The quads are a very large muscle group. You may want to turn your feet in and out as you roll so you can hit different angles on the foam roller. Working with one leg at a time makes it easier to do this.

**Modify it:** If foam rolling isn't an option, you can relieve tight quads with a rolling pin, Kolba says. Simply sit in a chair with your back straight, and gently move the rolling pin back and forth several times across the top of each thigh. Continue for at least one full minute per leg.

### 4. Calves: Ease Aches and Pain in Your Lower Legs

Pain in the bottom of your calf can be caused by limited mobility in your ankle. Foam rolling can help to break up knots in your calf and reduce pain throughout the lower legs, Kolba says.

**Try it:** Sit on the floor with legs extended. Place the foam roller underneath the middle of your right calf. Cross your left ankle over your right, and roll up and down along your right calf. Turn your foot to the inside and outside to hit the calf from every angle.

If you find a knot, flex and extend your foot to massage the hot spot against the roller. Stay on each tender spot for about 20 seconds, and apply pressure gently. A mild amount of discomfort is expected, but you shouldn't be in pain. But don't stay too long: If you spend five or 10 minutes on the same spot, you could cause damage to the tissue or nerves.

**Modify it:** As with the quads, you can use a rolling pin to release trigger points in your calves. Simply roll across your calves from a seated position. If that's too difficult, ask a family member or friend to assist in the process. And while you're at it, Kolba recommends asking them to target any other tight or sore areas of your body.