

Up! Loosen

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Now the warmer months are here and we are feeling a little more energised, there's no better time to fine tune our training programmes and ensure we've got all aspects of our health and fitness regime covered. As we know, cross training is a great way to train and lowers the risk of injury as well as improving our cardiovascular fitness and strength and endurance which are paramount to our health. But what about maintaining a functional range of movement through our major joints whilst increasing our strength in order to maintain healthy posture and movement pattern?

Does your current training programme increase or decrease the mobility of your joints and spine? If you are a runner for example, are you counteracting the loss of flexibility in the hips that running creates with any other activity? Likewise, if you are chest pressing your body weight, how are you counteracting the tightness in the pectorals and front deltoids that inevitably occurs? If the answer is that you don't do anything then you will invariably be losing essential mobility in your joints. Not only does this decrease the amount of muscles fibre recruitment you are able to achieve with each repetition of your chosen activity, which results in less power and/or endurance, but it will over time affect every aspect of your health. This includes your posture, the efficiency of your breathing, recovery from training, muscles, tendon and ligament resilience, and your overall general well-being.

The solution? It's time for you to add some effective and functional flexibility and stability work into your training regime. The next yoga postures/asana are time-effective and functional in that they work and stretch more than one muscles group at a time and will only take up several minutes of your training time. When practiced in unison these movements will stretch all your major joints and strengthen your core area. They are also effective when practiced as individual movements.

The exercises:

The first two yoga postures are compound movements and they are designed to elevate your heart rate and are best done once you are warmed up. They stretch and

strengthen the lower body and are effective for maintaining a good range of movement through the pelvis. This makes them especially beneficial for runners and cyclists.

Side Angle Pose

Step the feet approximately 1.5 metres apart, turn your right foot out 90-degrees and your left foot in 45-degrees. Place a yoga block on the inside of your right foot. Reach your arms out to either side so they are parallel to the floor and then place your right forearm on your right thigh. Now extend your left arm straight up and then reach it over so that it is in line with your left ear with your palm facing the floor. Stretch from the edge of the left foot all the way through to your left fingertips, lengthening the entire left side of your body. Once you have the feeling of length through the left side of the body, allow your right hand to drop down onto the yoga block. To help stretch the right adductor (inner thigh) muscles, gently push into the right inner thigh with the right arm. Look forwards and relax your face. Ensure you maintain strength through your legs and core so the right arm does not have to support the posture. Hold this for 6-8 deep breaths and repeat on the other side.





Crescent Lunge

From standing with the feet together, take a big step back (approximately 1.5m) with the right leg and at the same time bend the left knee to a 90-degree angle so you are in a runners lunge position. The toes of the right foot should be tucked under and your hips facing forwards. Reach your arms upwards so they are in line with your ears and your hands are shoulder-width apart. Keep the right leg as straight as possible to increase the stretch in the hip flexors and strongly contract the quadriceps, keeping the heel off the ground. Ensure your left knee is directly over the left ankle and the left thigh is parallel to the floor. Now draw your navel in towards the spine to help support your lower back. Take 6-8 deep breaths so you feel the rib cage expand and retract. With control, move back to your start position by bringing the right foot back to meet the left, moving as slowly as possible to increase your stability. Repeat on the other side.

Downward Dog with Abdominal Squeeze

These movements are effective for strengthening the core area but as well as working the abdominal muscles (mainly transverse and lower rectus abdominus), are also great for increasing spine and shoulder mobility and hamstring and hip flexor flexibility.

From a kneeling box position, move your hands forwards approximately 10cm. Ensure your middle finger is pointing forwards and your hands are fully stretched out, tuck your toes under and slowly start to inhale. As you exhale, press firmly into your hands, extend your legs so the hips move towards the sky. Allow your heels to drop towards the floor and the neck to relax. Take five deep breaths here. Now extend the right leg upwards and as you exhale,

Extend your legs so the hips move towards the sky

transfer your body weight into the upper body slightly and draw the right knee into towards the abdomen. At the same time, bring your chin towards your chest and round the spine so you can actively pull the navel into towards the spine as strongly as possible. Inhale and return to Downward Dog with the right leg reaching upwards. Repeat 6-10 times and then repeat on the other side.





Boat Pose

This asana is great for increasing overall core strength as it strengthens the spinal extensors as well as the abdominal area (mainly rectus abdominus). It is also effective in improving mental focus.

Start in a seated position. Now bend your legs and place your feet on the floor. Lean back slightly so your body weight transfers to the back sitting bones. The spine will now be on a straight diagonal. Keeping your chin parallel to the floor, reach your arms forwards so they are also level to the floor. At the same time, lift and extend your legs upwards so that your feet are level with your eye-line or slightly higher. Keep the abdomen strong and the chest lifted so the lumbar spine stays straight and does not round at all. Hold this for 6-8 breaths and then repeat 2-3 more times. For increased intensity raise the arms so they are in line with your ears and lower your legs a little.

Forward Bends

These forward bending postures are great to do at the end of a workout as they calm the nervous system and lower the heart rate.

Wide Leg Forward Bend

Stand with your feet approximately 1.5 meters wide (take a shorter stance if you have tightness in the adductors and/or hips) and turn your feet in a little to help stretch the ankles. Keep your legs straight and take your arms behind your back interlacing your fingers. Slowly bend forwards from the waist by tilting the pelvis forwards. Maintain the length and extension of the spine until the crown of your head is pointing down towards the ground. Allow your neck to relax and breathe. Now gently lift your arms away from your back so the front of the shoulders start to stretch. The palms of your hands should be facing your back. It is important that the neck stays relaxed throughout. Remain here for 6-8 deep breaths before returning to your start position, moving slowly throughout.



Seated Forward Bend

This is an intense stretch for the lumbar area, hamstrings and glute muscles.

Start in a seated position with your legs straight in-front of you and with your feet flexed (toes pointing upwards). Sit with your spine as straight as possible and ensure you are on the sitting bones. If you feel you are rounding through the lower back sit on a yoga block to help straighten the spine. Now exhale and lean the upper body forwards, extending from the lower back so the upper body moves towards the thighs. To maximise the stretch of the hamstrings and calf muscles, either hold your feet and gently pull them back towards you. If you cannot reach your feet, place a yoga belt or similar band around your feet and gently pull the belt towards you. Relax your head and neck and breathe. If you find this yoga posture particularly challenging, bend your knees slightly and be mindful to avoid straining. Hold for 8-10 breaths.

Sally Parkes Yoga is a London based yoga and Pilates company that specialises in private tuition, classes and retreats in both the UK and abroad. Based in the Marylebone and Harley Street area of London, Sally Parkes Yoga is devoted to incorporating yoga and Pilates into your everyday life. Home visits and bespoke programmes available upon request. Contact us now to arrange your free 15 minutes phone consultation on **07967 388363**. Sally Parkes will be running yoga teacher training from July 2012.

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