

BODY MECHANICS AND SELF-CARE

The Hip Flexors

by George P. Kousaleos

The hip flexors are some of the most-used muscles in the entire body. Whether one is walking up a flight of stairs or bending forward to tie a shoe, the hip flexors create the movements that create flexion at the front of the body. Massage therapists and bodywork practitioners are often bending down toward the massage table and applying pressure with a stroke or lifting the client's arm or leg to provide a range-of-motion exercise.

The key muscles of hip flexion include the psoas major and iliacus, together known as the iliopsoas, and also include the rectus femoris of the quadriceps group, along with the sartorius of the anterior compartment of the thigh. The pectineus, adductor longus and adductor brevis of the medial thigh and tensor fascia lata of the lateral hip are also considered secondary hip flexors. The key anatomical element of all of these muscles is they cross the hip joint along the anterior plane of the body.

Many people's hip flexors are often weaker in relationship to the more extrinsic muscles of the quadriceps and abdomen. They are often the most neglected group of muscles in strength training, even though they are critically important in a wide array of athletic and sporting activities. Weakened hip flexors allow the pelvis to rotate forward, often putting too much strain on the lumbar region and increasing the potential for low-back pain.

To improve hip flexion and increase the power derived from the body's core, massage therapists should focus on self-care exercises that integrate flexion movements between the axial and lower appendicular skeleton, in order to build both strength and flexibility in this vital region.

Self-care exercises for the hip flexors

① **Strength:** Lay supine on an exercise ball with your weight centered on the lumbar region. Perform a modified crunch with your arms parallel to each other and with both hands reaching toward the outside of your knees. Move slowly, exhaling while you flex the hips and inhaling on the return to the starting position.

To strengthen the lower portion of the hip flexors do single leg raises, first with a flexed knee, later with an extended leg.

② **Stretch:** Kneel on the floor with the rest of the body in an upright position. Support your lower back with both hands and begin a series of hyperextension stretches, each held through several breaths. For more advanced hyperextension, reach down behind your body and place your hands on each heel. Allow the cervical, thoracic and lumbar spine to move into full hyperextension.

③ **Mobility:** Lay supine with knees flexed and feet flat on the floor. Apply moderate pressure with your fingertips just outside of the rectus abdominus at mid-abdomen. Perform a series of pelvic lifts, lengthening the lumbar spine, and then move both knees side to side. Palpate to determine which psoas is more contracted, or bunched, and use slow, cross-fiber techniques to balance the two sides.

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