

# WHY YOUR HAMSTRING STRETCHES AREN'T WORKING

**Camille Ronesi**

Tight hamstrings are a poorly understood issue. Chances are, if you are someone who has struggled with tight hamstrings, no amount of straight leg stretches or foam rolling has helped. You'll often suffer from low back pain and probably calf and shin issues. I have even seen incidences in which jaw alignment impacts a person's ability to touch their toes!

"Tightness" is a symptom, a whitewashing of underlying problems. By looking at two of the tests for hamstring mobility, we can begin to understand how to address the problem rather than continue to prescribe ineffectual and hackneyed therapies.

## Test #1: The Active Straight Leg Raise

I use this test on a nearly daily basis. It is super quick, simple, and surprisingly revealing. What's more, the exercises that come out of it look just like the test, making prescription extremely specific and memorable.

Lie on the floor on your back. The legs are straight with feet touching and flexed. Ideally, the knees are resting on a board (2x4) or some approximation. This gives biofeedback for you and a visual cue for the tester. The arms should be outstretched and the palms face up to reduce cheating (you'd be surprised). Keeping the left knee firmly glued to the board, slowly (and I mean that, speed = cheating) lift your right leg as high as possible, keeping it very straight. If the foot breaks the plane of mid-thigh, that's a "pass". If the foot only breaks the plane of the knee, that's a "proceed with caution". If the foot doesn't even break the plane of the knee that would be a "requires attention".

Here's the trick: You, the leg lifter, will feel tightness in the hamstring but always remember that that is a symptom, not the SOURCE. Things that will limit your leg raise can be (but not limited to):

- Tight Hip Flexors: The opposite hip flexor can be "holding down" the hip or interfering with core stability. Rule out if it's actually a problem of tight hip flexors (LINK), in which case you'll need other drills.

- Poor Motor Control: Bad habits (slouching), breathing problems (chest breathing), or developmental errors leftover from your toddler days can have you firing up the wrong muscles at the wrong time. When lifting a leg, the deep pelvic stabilizers anchor the hips so that the quads can do their job. If the pelvic floor doesn't work, then the hip flexors WILL. (See Tight Hip Flexors.) The pelvis tilts, putting the hamstrings under tension. They aren't tight, they are getting yanked on!

-Legitimately short hamstrings: You could actually have shortened, tight hamstrings. Hey, it happens. You can test this by having someone passively move your leg through a range of motion. If it's still limited here, you actually would benefit from regular stretching and myofascial release.

Fortunately, most of the sources can be addressed through the same series of exercises. Unless you need to directly address your hip flexors, practice the below series 1 to 3 times a day. Always focus on deep breathing and excellent form. If it hurts, stop. Only work to the point of feeling tension, never push past it. Over time, that point of tension will be further and further along until you are in optimal range of motion. If you're holding your breath, you're cheating.

Repeat all three drills for 2-3 circuits.

1. Myofascial release: Foam roll hamstrings, IT Band, calves. Tennis balls on the calf and behind the knees, even the bottom of the foot!
2. Active Leg Lowering #1: Lie in a doorway with one leg propped up, the other straight out on the floor. Both legs are very straight, the propped leg only high enough to barely feel the tension. On an exhale, press the down leg into the floor for 6 seconds. Engage the core and lift the leg as high as possible. Slowly lower and repeat. Every few reps, the up leg should feel a little "looser". Scootch closer to the wall to increase the stretch again. Do a total of 6-10 reps for both legs.
3. The Brettzel: Yup, the same drill for tight hip flexors is useful for tight hamstrings, too. The key is to breathe! Lie on your right side (you will likely be more comfortable with a pillow). Bring your left knee up to your chest, use your right arm to hold it in place. Slowly draw your right leg back until you can grab your right foot with your left hand. Exhale and begin to release your left shoulder back towards the floor. As you exhale, create an isometric contraction- pressing your left leg and right leg into your hands. Inhale and relax deeper into the stretch. Repeat 3-5 times.

Test #2: The Toe Touch

A simple move that says far more about motor control than hamstring mobility, the toe touch is my clearance test for anyone who wants to perform deadlifts or kettlebell swings. Stand with your feet together and your legs straight without locking the knees. Exhale and slowly reach for your toes.

When you can't reach your toes, the most likely culprit- tight musculature aside- is incorrect weight shifting. Imagine standing with your back to the wall. Should you try to bend over for a toe touch, you'd fall flat on your face. Not being able to touch your toes could be your body's way of always thinking it's back is to the wall and it's tightening up to keep you from falling over. IN other words, you don't know how to shift your weight BACK. I think of it as "not trusting your glutes."

The drill is elegant- simple and effective. Stand with your legs together, the balls of your feet resting on a 2 inch riser (books work great). Place a yoga block or soccer-sized ball between your thighs. On an exhale reach for your toes as far as possible keeping the legs straight but not locked. Inhale and squeeze the block, exhale and lower further. Continue to squeeze and lower until you hit your absolute limit. Bend your knees just enough to touch your toes and stand up. Repeat 10 times. Always finish by bending your knees just enough to touch your toes. Breathing is crucial here! You can double whammy this drill by repeating it, but this time with your heels on the board rather than your toes. For the real magic, once done, re-test your toe touch. Did it improve. Awesome, you know how to weight shift. Repeat this drill prior to exercise every time until the day comes that you can touch your toes with no problem.

PS: Don't forget the sneakiest fix of all time: Sit up straight!!! If you have chronically tight hamstrings, chances are good that you tend to slouch. If you find yourself sitting on the back of your butt with a rounded spine, rather than on TOP of your butt, spine straight, know that you are only encouraging tight hamstrings. Every time you slouch, you undo all of your hard work in therapy and then some.