

**Matthew Axtman, DO**  
**Corewell Health Orthopedics**

## **Keep on Rolling: The Pros and Cons of Foam Rollers**

Runners strive for peak performance in training and competition. Whether they are maintaining a specific diet, training program or brand of shoe, runners are very much creatures of habit. One common practice is foam rolling. Some say foam rolling benefits athletes, but new questions have surfaced on whether foam rolling is actually effective in increasing performance and addressing musculoskeletal pains.

So, what exactly is foam rolling and why do we do it? There are a variety of rollers. Some are smooth, others have knobs and ridges and still others are made of hard plastic. Athletes use foam rollers, either before or after exercise, to massage a muscle or tissue, target areas of discomfort and decrease pain and tightness. Many athletes say it is a simple way to target an area of pain and it helps in with performance and recovery. But the question remains, from a scientific perspective: Does it really help?

What does foam rolling actually do to the body? We are not quite sure, but there are many theories behind why it works. One theory is that it targets and stretches the myofascia, which is a thin connective tissue layer, very much like a thin plastic wrap, that covers the muscle. Pain may result if the myofascia is not working in concert with the muscles. The thought is that foam rolling over areas of soft tissue not only stretches this fascial layer, but it also can improve blood flow, mobilize fluid and stimulate the creation of new tissue to help with performance and recovery. Another theory is that foam rolling over muscles and tendons can improve flexibility and range of motion, resulting in fewer injuries. Studies have shown that foam rolling is more beneficial than stretching alone.

On the down side, recent research questions whether foam rolling is actually beneficial. Many previous studies have looked into whether foam rolling affects the soft tissues, but results have been mixed. New research indicates no increase in performance after foam rolling. The study did show decreased muscle stiffness after foam rolling, but the benefits only lasted for approximately 15 minutes. This research incorporated a very small sample size and was not tested across multiple sports. It also highlighted concerns about damaging underlying soft tissue if foam rolling is too aggressive and not performed properly.

The bottom line is that we still do not know exactly what foam rolling does at the cellular level. However, if you feel like you benefit from foam rolling, there isn't necessarily any harm in it as long as you're doing it properly and safely. If you feel that it helps with pain as well as performance, there is no reason to stop. And if you are looking to incorporate foam rolling into your pre- or post-workout program, check out online resources or talk to a personal trainer or physical therapist.

If you have any questions or concerns about an injury or pain that you are experiencing, do not hesitate to reach out to one of our experienced sports medicine physicians at Corewell Health Orthopedics at (616) 267-8860. You can also find more information about our orthopedic program and providers on our [website](#).

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