



PRODUCT REVIEW: THE FOAM ROLLER

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I've been fascinated recently with this light-weight cylindrical product they call the 'foam roller'. I, like most of you, train intensely and quite often find myself in an 'oh-my-gosh-I-can't-move-my-body' state. I've been looking for something to add to my 'toolbox' of post-workout products and with the recent rise in popularity of foam rollers, I was on a mission to research and see what the buzz was about.

It turns out the foam roller is so much more than I originally thought. Not only is it a relatively mobile piece of equipment that comes in a variety of sizes and densities, it's also used for more than just muscular release. It can be used to increase flexibility & soft tissue mobility, balance, coordination and stabilization. Here is a closer look at what actually happens in the body while using a foam roller and how that can be beneficial to your overall health and wellness.

Flexibility and Soft Tissue Mobility

In essence, *rolling* with the foam roller stimulates autogenic inhibition of the muscle spindles. By putting pressure on a tender part of your muscle (ie. a sore spot you are experiencing from a workout or acute or chronic injury), you send signals to the golgi tendon organs (sensory receptors within a muscle tendon that sense tension) to communicate with the muscle spindles, which also sit within a muscle, to inhibit their action (a naturally involuntary response) thus releasing the pressure in that area. In other words, the foam roller puts pressure on the sore spot which triggers the golgi tendon organs to tell the muscle spindles to relax and relieve the tension in that area. You've probably seen many gym friends use the roller to 'massage' their glutes, quads, hamstrings and calves. I put 'massage' in quotes because, well, it may not actually feel like a relaxing massage! The rule of thumb is if it hurts a bit, you've hit the right spot. Stay on that spot for a few seconds before moving on to another problem area. As with traditional resistance training, do multiple sets of 15-30 seconds is recommended as often as you need!

Balance, Coordination and Stabilization

The foam roller can be used for virtually any exercise or muscle(s) you can think of, but it is generally used to work the lower body. As previously mentioned, there are many different types of rollers but the two most common ones are either full (complete circle) or half (think a full roller divided right down the middle).

Use the half roller to promote stronger stabilizing muscles by creating an unstable surface ~ much like many other balance training equipment available out there. And just like those other pieces of equipment that allow you to progress, you can progress your training with foam rollers simply by 1) flipping the half roller flat-side up to create an even more unstable surface, 2) moving from the smaller diameter roller (standard is 4") to the larger one (standard is 6") which increases the space between you and the floor and thus increases the level of difficulty of an exercise'. Exercises to promote balance, coordination and stabilization include: standing on the roller, standing on the roller with your eyes closed (stay near a wall for this one!) and squatting while on the roller, to name a few.

For upper body work with a focus on core stabilization, the roller is often used to lie on. You've probably seen this at the gym and thought, 'those people sure aren't doing a whole lot by just laying there!'. But truthfully, your core, which consists of your rectus abdominis, transversus (transverse) abdominis, internal and external obliques, and erector spinae, are all firing to contract and well, keep you from falling off the roller — no small feat! Try this one yourself: simply lay supine (that's tummy-side up) on the full roller and increase the level of intensity by varying your base of support: feet wide on the floor, then bring them together, then take one leg off at a time and balance for a few seconds. Progressions with arms and adding other equipment such as medicine balls, dumbbells and kettle bells can be a great goal to strive towards.

The Verdict?

I love the foam roller! I think it's an innovative way to use a piece of equipment through various functionalities that are synonymous with everyday activities. It is super light-weight, portable (if you purchase a shorter length) and is a great way to get a quick massage anywhere, anytime. Probably the most beneficial use of a foam roller is that you really get to know your body by rolling on it and challenging the body through balance and coordination by standing on it. Adding other equipment to the mix simply increases the level of difficulty which means you can use foam rollers for extended periods of time within your program without plateauing. Most facilities have a

few rollers available for general use but I strongly recommend asking a trainer or staff member to assist you in using it the first time to ensure you're performing the exercises correctly. Just keep in mind that every piece of equipment has its benefits and detriments. Do your research, test out the equipment and always choose what's best for you.

Resource: 1. Foam Roller Fitness, (Erb., E. (2006)



Daniela Tempesta is a BCRPA Trainer of Fitness Leaders, Consultant & Fitness Champion. Previously the Director of Group Exercise of a large women's only fitness chain, she has now transitioned into consulting, presenting and authoring fitness resources. She is excited to contribute to AbsoluteOC's passion and dedication to effecting a positive and healthy change in our society. To contact Daniela, visit her website at: www.danielatempesta.com or email her at danielatempesta@shaw.ca