

Stronger Hips, Smoother Running

By Jeff Taylor-Haas, PT, DPT, OCS, CSCS
Physical Therapist & Running Biomechanist
Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center

Have you ever wanted to run more efficiently? Did you make a New Year's Resolution to be injury-free in 2013? If you answered yes to either one of these questions then you should read on.

Along with proper training, nutrition, and rest, maximized hip strength is an important factor for both reducing the likelihood of injury and running more smoothly. The hip muscles work with the trunk muscles and the thigh muscles to absorb shock, keep your body upright, and propel your body forward as you run (or walk). As you increase speed or distance it is important that the hip muscles are strong and do not fatigue quickly. Recent studies have demonstrated that common running injuries such as patellofemoral syndrome (runner's knee), iliotibial band (IT Band) syndrome, and even shin pain may be partially attributed to hip muscle weakness. So you may wonder what muscles do I need to strengthen and how do I go about strengthening them?

The main hip muscle groups to focus on are your hip abductor muscles (side hip muscles such as the gluteus medius and gluteus minimus), your hip extensor muscles (such as your gluteus maximus), and your hip flexor muscles (front hip muscles such as your iliopsoas). These muscles work together to protect your hip joint, spine, knees, and shins while you run (and walk).

To strengthen your hip abductor muscles lay down on your side. Bend your bottom leg and keep your top leg straight. Now, keeping your top leg straight slowly raise it up in the air approximately 24-36 inches before slowly returning to the starting position. Perform 2-3 sets of 10-15 repetitions on each side. You should feel that the muscles on the side of your hip are working and getting tired.

To strengthen your hip extensor muscles, such as your gluteus maximus, try performing a double leg bridge. Lay on your back with your knees bent up. Tighten your abdominal muscles and slowly lift your buttocks off the ground about 12-24 inches. Hold this position for 2-5 seconds and then slowly lower your body to the ground. Perform 2-3 sets of 10.

To strengthen your hip flexor muscles lay on your back. Bend one leg so that your knee is bent roughly ninety degrees and your foot is resting on the ground comfortably. With the other leg, keep your knee straight, tighten your thigh muscle, and slowly raise your leg off the ground approximately 24-36 inches. Keeping your knee straight and your thigh muscle tight, slowly lower your leg back to the ground. Perform 2-3 sets of 10-15 repetitions on both legs.

It is important to remember that if you have pain with any of these exercises you should stop immediately.

Performing these three exercises after you run will help to strengthen your hips. In doing so, you will be taking the first steps towards improving your running form and reducing your likelihood for sustaining an injury.

Keep on Running!

Jeff Taylor-Haas, PT, DPT, OCS, CSCS