

Stretch for strength

Integrating yoga with your running routine could save your knees.

BY MARYLENE VESTERGOM

For many, running is almost an addiction. With the passing years, it becomes a part of us.

We run through the seasons, indoors, outdoors. We run when we feel great and we run through the tough times too. Running has many health benefits, both mental and physical, but there can be a downside. It is a repetitive activity, and the load placed on our knees can be anywhere between five to 12 times our bodyweight.

A pioneer in the development of yoga for runners and an avid runner for over 20 years, Toronto's Christine Felstead understands that runner A-type personality all too well and how runners often don't address issues like flexibility and stretching until they are injured. "Then, once they've overcome their injuries, they go right back to the same activity, often not incorporating those important lessons," she says.

There are many reasons why the infamous runner's knee is prevalent within the running community. Certainly biomechanical issues play a huge part.

"However, it's important to properly strengthen the muscles that support the knees, like your glutes, quads and hamstrings," says Dr. Cam Borody, sports chiropractor with Sports Medicine Specialists in Toronto. He notes that for runners, the lateral quadriceps and Iliotibial (IT) bands tend to get tight over time, and the less relied upon medial quadriceps or abductors tend to become weak. So it's important to develop a balanced strengthening

approach as well as to maintain flexibility and limit tension in the quads and IT bands.

Dr. Borody likes the idea of runners adding yoga to their weekly routine to help reduce muscular tension and flexibility imbalances. As always, if you're feeling any pain or discomfort, you should seek out the advice of a health professional before taking on any new activity or rehabilitation regime, he says.

Felstead agrees body awareness is key for runners. When it comes to the knees, "it's never a question of finding one pose. It's more about being aware of what muscles need to be activated, then finding those muscles in your yoga practice."

"For instance, every standing pose should include some degree of engagement of the inner thigh," she says. She also recommends supportive wall squats or the chair pose. This pose will help strengthen the quadriceps, hamstrings and abductors. You can even place a block between your thighs, keeping your ankles under your knees and making sure your knees do not go past your toes. Once your legs get stronger you can move away from the wall.

A favourite of Felstead's is the hero pose—where you sit on your shins. It is great for stretching quad muscles. Like any pose, do only what is comfortable, she says. Use a blanket as a prop to provide that degree of comfort. If your feet hurt, prop up your ankles. If you



can't get your hips down to your heels, then you need to add a pillow or bolster. "Not everyone will be able to do it if they're very tight, so prop yourself up to the point that's safe and you're feeling no aches or pain."

Felstead is passionate about the healing and therapeutic effects of yoga. "If you're looking for a complementary activity, look no further," she says. "Yoga will reveal imbalances and weaknesses, but it will also provide you with a path of restorative wellbeing."

Understanding how powerful yoga can be for runners drives Felstead to help them stay healthy and, yes, running. She has created a six-part online educational series to help runners and yoga enthusiasts deepen their flexibility and muscular strength. Each

episode includes an anatomy overview and focuses on a key part of the body, including the spine, core, upper body, hips, hamstrings, and feet, ankles and knees. Each session provides specific muscle isolation exercises and a yoga sequence integrating the body focus.

You might not be able to attend one of her drop-in classes, but having Felstead guide you through each session is the next best thing. Make yoga a part of your routine—that's the first step. It will reduce chances of injury, and your body and running will be better off. **Z**

To learn more about the online series, see yogaforrunners.com

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