Ep #142: Exploring the Hamstrings

Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Susi Hately

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Male Announcer: You're listening to *From Pain to Possibility* with Susi Hately. You will hear Susi's best ideas on how to reduce or even eradicate your pain and learn how to listen to your body when it whispers so you don't have to hear it scream. And now here's your host, Susi Hately.

Welcome and welcome back. With this episode I want to dig into the hamstrings because for so many people the hamstrings can really create a lot of grief. Or a lot of grief, rather, is placed on the hamstrings.

A lot of people believe that the reason they have back pain is because of the hamstrings. A lot of yoga professionals who are trying to move forward into standing forward bend, like uttanasana, or on their back into supine hamstring stretch, often called supta padangusthasana, or people who are wanting to improve their sitting forward bend, paschimottanasana, they'll often blame the hamstrings for limiting them in those movements.

So with this episode I want to explain why I don't necessarily agree with that, what I tend to do when I'm working with people who are complaining about their hamstrings, and how I think it is that what I do is so helpful. So what I'm going to walk you through is the anatomy of the hamstrings, the function of the hamstrings, and then things that I tend to do with my clientele that can have impact.

And the idea here is I'd love for you to go and explore this for your own self and then see what happens to your back, see what happens to your overall movement. And if you want to take it further, there's a link on the episode website page where you can go into a YouTube video where you can explore more about the hips, which also includes hamstrings, but not just hamstrings.

Which if I can give you a spoiler alert, is really the whole point here of this episode, is that we can heap a lot of blame on the hamstrings, but it's actually often not the hamstrings issue. And in fact, the more we try and keep hammering on the hamstrings, the further away from our desired outcome we will get.

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All right, so let's dig in. So when we're looking at the hamstrings, I like to focus on the three primary hamstrings, the semimembranosus, the semitendinosus, and the biceps femoris. Now, when you hear the word biceps, think two heads, short and long head.

And all of this group, semimembranosus, semitendinosus, and both the short and the long head of the biceps femoris, they all cross the knee and they act on the knee by bending the knee. So think of yourself in standing. And then with one foot, take that one foot heel toward your hip. So you're bending your knee, that's your hamstring that's doing that work.

Now when we look at the top end of the hamstrings, we have the top end of the semimembranosus, the semitendinosus, and the long head of the biceps femoris, those three cross the hip. And they act on the hip to create extension. So think of, again, you're standing and then you move the leg behind you, right? So think about stepping backward, or stepping into a high lunge, that extension of the hip, that is in part created by the hamstrings.

So you're getting an idea of the anatomy here. So when we think about function, what becomes really interesting is looking at it from like an activity perspective. So think about kicking a soccer ball. So we're bending that knee, that's a hamstring involved movement. When we're extending the leg, that's a hamstring involved movement. When we're walking, when we're running, when we're loading the front leg when we're walking and running and bending the knee, that's hamstring.

When we are taking the leg backward, that's hamstring. And then when we're downhill skiing, now the leg is not swinging. In fact, the legs, they're moving, but the feet are planted on skis and boots. We're moving into flexion at the hips, hip extension. But the upper body, the torso, is in flexion, it's moving forward.

So the hamstrings in part, there's other muscles involved too, but the hamstrings in part are working to help stabilize that torso. And that's one reason why at the end of a day of downhill skiing people can feel that their

hamstrings are really tight or they can even hurt. So that just gives a bit of perspective on the hamstrings, where they are and what they do and thinking about them in terms of activity.

Now, it's really common when people come to see me that they've got pain. And a lot of times when they've got SI joint pain or back pain, a major complaint will be about their hamstrings. Their hamstrings feel so tight and why can't I release my hamstrings? Why won't they let go? Because if only they could let go, then that SI and the back pain will let go and will be relieved as well.

One of the first things that I share with people when they are saying those things is that might be so, but if you're consistently trying to make the hamstrings release, and all the work you're doing trying to make them release and it's not working, it means that that's not the area to work. What I love about the body is that the body will tell me over and over again if I'm in the right place.

And the body, if I'm doing the right thing, will respond quite quickly. Even if I'm doing the wrong thing it will respond quite quickly. But that's the beauty of it, is it will respond. It will show me if I'm in the right place. So if I'm trying something and it's not going in the direction that I'm expecting, then chances are I'm not doing the thing it needs me to do.

So in this case, when someone is saying to me, "I'm doing all this work with my hamstrings and nothing is changing and my back pain is either staying the same or getting worse, same for the SI joint pain," then it's clear that where they're working is not quite in the right place.

I remember a really long time ago one of my anatomy mentors said to me, when someone has SI joint or back pain, oftentimes the hamstrings are coming in to create a sense of stability. They're coming in to try and create control and coordination because the tissue that's meant to be creating control and coordination is not. It's one of the reasons the back pain or the SI pain exists.

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So then the hamstrings, being the good foot soldiers that they are, they're attempting to try and bring in more stability. But they're doing it in a way that's not working, because that's not their job in the day to day movement game.

So a big piece of the puzzle then, is to really support clients to be able to bring on the structures that are meant to bring about stability, control, coordination, so that the range of motion of the leg, the way the leg and the pelvis interact, the way the pelvis and the spine interact, becomes so much better. Because when that's better, not only will the back pain and the SI pain go away, but so will the tightness or the perceived tightness in the hamstrings.

So it's all just a big, big, big communication mechanism when those hamstrings are not letting go despite all the stretching and despite all the intervention that someone is doing, yeah? So then what do I then do? So I focus in on how can I help bring about more stability?

And a moment ago I made reference to control and coordination, and I love the definition of stability, which is not my own. I read it from somewhere many, many moons ago, which is stability is control and coordination over a range of motion. So by control, I'm not meaning a grippy sense of control. I mean like the limb has control as it moves through a range. So we're wanting to foster a smooth and coordinated range of motion. We want to help foster intelligent strength.

So when we're looking at how the leg and the pelvis interact, I love to start by thinking about the pelvis as being this incredible platform. It's a platform on which the leg bone moves forward and back, side to side, and into rotation. And there's muscles that help provide that stability that connect the leg to the pelvis.

So we're looking at the hip abductors, the hip adductors, some of the deeper rotators, those are all helping to bring connection between the leg bone and the pelvis. Now, I speak about this in Episode 126 when I talk about back pain and I refer to form and force closure.

So when we're helping to create that form and force closure, we can help bring so much more stability, so much more control, so much more coordination between the legs, the pelvis, the spine. So when there is that inherent control and coordination, things can settle out and the hamstrings can start to let go.

So now, how are ways that I might do this? So the first way to consider, this is not the first thing I tend to do with clients, but to keep in the flow of leg bone, pelvis, spine, consider a line on your back right now. And consider supta padangusthasana, which is the yoga way of saying hamstring stretch. So that's the movement where you're bringing your knees to your belly and then the foot comes up to the sky, so straight through the knee and the foot comes to the sky.

A lot of times when people do this movement is they bring the knee to the belly, the pelvis moves into a tuck, and the back flattens towards the floor. I want you to consider doing that movement but not having the pelvis tuck, nor having the spine come flat to the floor. Really focus on the leg bone solely moving into flexion at that hip socket.

In order for that to happen, the hip flexors are engaging and the hamstrings need to release. Then once you've brought that leg up, now start to move the knee into extension. And without bringing your pelvis into a tuck, or the spine into a flattening against the floor, what happens between your hip, your knee, and your foot?

A lot of times what people will realize is that they are quite limited through the leg more than they thought, because they've been compensating with their pelvis and their spine. So even though they're feeling a little tight through their hamstring, or a lot tight in their hamstrings, now they're really seeing the relationship between their leg, their pelvis, their spine, their knee and their foot. And that can be really eye opening for people. So consider that to get a baseline for where that movement pattern is.

Now, the next thing I like to do is a movement that I call block and strap. And they’re actually two separate movements, but I often use them one

after the other. So again, we're on the back, knees are bent, feet are on the floor. And place a block between your thighs about one inch from the pubic bone. So you're into what I like to call the meat of the adductors.

So you decide, like when you have a yoga block, the yoga block can come in a few different widths. We can put it medium, thin, or wide. You choose the width that makes the most sense, that has your back feeling good, your SI feeling good. And in that position, then start to squeeze the block.

Now, don't try and squeeze the foam or the wood out of the freaking block, you're just squeezing it gently. Just enough to feel something perhaps in the adductors. And then relax, stay and hold onto the block. Now, when you're doing this movement the hamstrings are not involved. The only muscle that's involved, or group of muscles that's involved as you're squeezing that block are the adductors. That's it.

And then when you release, it's more like a releasing of the adductors, you're not pulling the legs away. So your hip flexors aren't involved, your hamstrings aren't involved, the tissue around your SI and your back is not involved. It's just your legs moving toward each other and away from each other, toward each other and away from each other. So it’s just toward and then release, toward and then release. So it's just the adductors, that's it.

After you do a few of those, then take the block away and tie a strap or a belt around your legs. We’re going to do the exact same thing, but this time pressing the legs wide into the strap. So now it's not the adductors, obviously, that are working, it's the outer hip. So you're pressing wide and then releasing. So you're not pulling the legs back in. It's just you've pressed wide and then you've released, you've pressed wide and then you've released, that's it.

And then pay attention to what that feels like. Again, the hamstrings are not involved here. Your butt is not evolved, around your SI is on involved, your back is not involved, your jaw is not involved. Nothing else is involved, it's just that outer hip as you press wide.

Okay, then after a few of those, let that go. And then notice what you feel. And from here, come back into coming into supta padang, bring the knee into your belly and bring the leg up. And just notice to see if there's any qualitative or quantitative change in the way that your leg bone moves in your pelvis.

Now, there might be some, there might not be. This is not like the go-to thing to release your hamstrings, that is not why I'm doing this. But for some people what you'll notice is because you've worked even a little bit around some of the muscles that are helping to create stability around the legs and the pelvis, you might just have helped those hamstrings go, “Oh, I feel like I'm on a beach, this feels great.”

And then as they come up into the movement, things begin to settle out. You are able to get just even maybe a little bit more range through the hip, maybe in through the knee. Bringing the legs back down, now just settle out through your legs and notice what you feel through your body.

Another movement that I might play with is in a supine side bend. So I want what you to imagine a crescent moon or the letter C. So your legs are straight out in front of you, feel where your right leg is and slide your right leg to the right without moving your hips. And then slide your left leg toward that right. It might not meet it, but again keep the pelvis totally quiet. This part is really, really important.

So you're just moving the leg in the hip socket, that's it. Pelvis stays the same. Now, if you're feeling good, you can take the other arm up alongside your ear bringing yourself in to a C shape or a crescent moon. But you've got to promise me you're only moving as far as there's no increase of strain, no increase of pain, no increase of tension. And then bring the arm back down and bring the legs back and move to the other side.

Again, the movement is really focused in on the leg bone moving in the hip socket. The pelvis is quiet, breath is easy. And then, if available, bringing the arm up only as far as it's comfortable.

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Now, we're coming through the lateral line, all the way perhaps from your shoulder down to your hip. And that can have a real impact on the outer hip muscles so that when you come back up and out of this and move into that, supta padangusthasana again you might also feel a change in the way that leg bone moves in the hip socket.

Why? Because the way those stabilizing muscles are working, they have a bit more suppleness to them perhaps. And that frees up the way that that leg bone sits in the socket. And that can have an impact on the way that you move your leg into flexion and the way that you extend your knee. And that can have an impact on the way the hamstrings feel. That can have an impact, also, on the way your back feels.

So really, really, really interesting to explore. Now, those are just four different movements that I've shared on audio in a podcast episode. If you want to explore this further in a YouTube video, then do go to the link that's in the episode page and you'll be taken through a few more exercises that can really start to help you connect to your pelvis, your leg, your spine.

It will include a little bit of hamstring work. And after it you might just feel those hamstrings in a different way, as well as your back in a different way. All in all, have a great, great time exploring and we'll see you next week.

If this episode has resonated and you're looking to deepen this idea of getting your body back on board, of listening deeply to your symptoms, of listening to the whispers so you don't have to hear the screams and you're looking for one to one support or professional training, then reach out to us at health@functionalsynergy.com where we can customize your learning path. That's health@functionalsynergy.com. Looking forward to hearing from you.