

Ep. #361 - Glutes



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With your host:

Susi Hatelly

[From Pain to Possibility](#) with Susi Hatelly

Introduction (00:00.00)

You are listening to From Pain To Possibility with Susi Hatley. You'll 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 Hatley.

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Welcome and welcome back. I'm so glad that you're here because today I wanna dig into the glutes because it's one muscle group that I consistently hear about when I'm working with people. It doesn't matter whether they're coming in with back pain, knee pain, hip discomfort, balance issues, or just a sense that their body isn't responding the way it used to.

At some point in the conversation, they tell me that somebody has told them glutes aren't firing, or maybe it was called dead butt syndrome or dormant glutes or lazy glutes. The wording varies, but the conclusion for each is the same: that your glutes are weak, your glutes are a problem. And I don't say that dismissively because the glutes are important.

They absolutely are. The literature supports it, and clinically we see their influence everywhere. What I find fascinating is how consistently the statement gets made, and yet also how consistently those same people who hear that are also strengthening their glutes already. So if everyone's glutes are lazy or not firing, then why are we doing the squats, the lunging, the bridging, the clam shelling band walking, hip thrusting, still being told the glutes aren't engaging? Because we are not short on glute exercises.

So either we are collectively failing at strengthening, or we're misunderstanding what the issue actually is. So this is where I get curious because I've been very effective, very effective at helping people reconnect with their glutes. Yet often when someone tells me their glutes are weak, we don't start with the glutes because so often with the clients that I see one-to-one and even in my group class is that it's not the glutes problem, that there's a ton of compensation present.

They might be holding their breath. They might have compensation between their ribs and their pelvis or how their leg bone moves in their pelvis. There might be some tension patterns in their neck or shoulders, down in their feet. But when we get whatever it is that is compensating sorted out, it's not surprising to see the glutes responding. Which leads me to wonder then maybe it's not weakness, not in the sense of weakness that needs strengthening.

Maybe it's a coordination pattern. Maybe it's relationship, and maybe the reason why for many people squeezing harder hasn't solved the problem is because for them, squeezing harder isn't actually the thing. That's the thing. So that's why I wanna unpack a bit more about what's going on with the glutes, not from a just strengthen them perspective, but rather from a pattern and coordination perspective.

And this builds upon previous episodes where I've been engaging this idea of movement detective, and movement detective really is about pattern and coordination recognition. When it relates to glutes, glutes aren't just about force. That's why I bring in a movement detective lens into this picture. It is so important.

Glutes really, when we look at them singularly, can be an amazing example of how our whole system coordinates.

When we say the glutes, we tend to speak as if it's one big muscle sitting on the back of the pelvis, but it's not. So let's take a moment and just break down the anatomy. And depending on how you break it down, there are six primary contributors to what are often casually lumped together as the glutes, and they start with the glute max, and that can even be divided into upper and lower fibers, the glute med with posterior and anterior portions, and the glute min.

There's also the deep rotators, sometimes called the deep six, working underneath in what's often considered a stabilizing role. And this distinction matters. When we begin with the glute max, those upper fibers, they weave into the IT band and their influence travels down the lateral thigh. And functionally, those upper fibers are powerful hip extensors. Think driving up a hill, standing up from a deep squat. Think propulsion and force. When someone aggressively grips their glutes, we can actually see those upper fibers really dominating.

Then there's the lower fibers, and they're a bit different because they attach directly onto the femur, and that provides a different mechanical relationship. So while they do contribute to hip extension, there's also an influence of rotation and there's been some speculation about stability, much like how the rotator cuff of the shoulder provides stability. They can influence the way the pelvis coordinates with the leg and vice versa. They can influence sacro alignment and they can influence gait.

So already within one muscle, a big one, the glute max, we have two different functional emphases.

Then there's the glute med, and the posterior fibers are particularly important for hip stability, especially when you're standing on one leg, and they help control side-to-side movement of the pelvis. They contribute to balance. They prevent that collapsing sensation when you shift your weight. And this is one reason why glute med strengthening has been linked to fall prevention in older adults especially, and including after hip replacement.

Underneath the glute med is the glute min, and that assists in abduction rotation and contributes to stabilizing the head of that thigh bone, the femur, in the socket. And then there's the deep rotators, those smaller muscles sitting close to the joint, fine-tuning rotation and stability of the femoral head in the acetabulum, the hip socket.

All of these muscles together provide different emphasis. So when someone says your glutes are weak, what are they actually talking about? Is it explosive extension, rotational control, single leg stability? Because in reality, those are not interchangeable. And when we collapse all of them into just squeeze harder, we lose the nuance.

From my experience, most people don't actually have weak glutes that require a whole bunch of strengthening, but they do have glutes that have been overridden.

Now, before I go on, before I get labeled as being a I don't support strengthening the glutes, I'm not saying that, not at all. Clearly the research supports strengthening the glutes. Let me give you a quick summary. We've seen that people with lower back pain demonstrate greater gluteal atrophy compared to control groups. There are measurable strength deficits and hip adductors and extensors associated with back pain. There are correlations between glute weakness and knee pain. Glute strength has been shown to predict fall risk in older adults, including after hip replacement.

Lower glute deep rotator strengthening, as I mentioned already, improves hip and knee replacement outcomes. And there's even specific intervention studies where seated butt squeezes about 10 minutes per day, roughly 200 contractions over eight weeks, can lead to increased hypertrophy and reduced back pain.

So clearly strengthening matters. And if that was the only thing, we wouldn't have all sorts of people who consistently have glutes that are not engaging. And there's a piece here that's incomplete. What the research measures and what the body's actually doing during movement are not always the same thing.

So CL shells, this is a great one, are commonly prescribed for the glute med, and yet in some data what they're finding is hip flexors. And I see this all the time, activating a lot more than the glute med during movement when the movement is not done well. And the research shows that the hip flexors activate roughly 54% while the glute med activates closer to 20.

So then when someone's fatiguing during clamshells and they're not really tuned into their body movement, then really what's getting tired? The research is saying that it might be the hip flexors, and that's certainly what I see dominating that pattern when people come to see me who've been given clamshells. When I help them do the clamshell, if they're really committed to the exercise, when I help them do that movement properly, hip flexors go away and they feel it entirely in that glute med area.

Bridge is another example. I see this so commonly. Someone squeezes their glutes first before they go into bridge. So if they're doing that, then what's actually lifting them? Knowing that the glutes are an extensor, if the glutes are already maximally contracted because they were squeezed first, they're not able to contract through the movement.

So the work shifts, and I see it mostly with my clients going into the lower back. So again, it's not that bridges are rung, not at all. How a person's doing the bridges can have a huge impact, and that is what impacts strengthening. It's the coordination pattern, it's the neuromuscular connections, motor control and coordination.

So instead of asking, is this the right exercise, I like to ask what's actually happening while this person is doing it? What's really meant to be doing its job during this movement and what's not?

And is the thing that's not meant to be happening happening? Is the thing that's meant to be happening actually happening?

That's where we see neuromuscular patterning working or not. If you squeeze your glutes first and then try to move, what's actually moving? If you're holding your breath, embracing your ribs, what's actually moving? If your hip flexors get bossy, what happens with your glutes?

So many people are trying to turn their glutes on, but maybe a place to begin is not trying to turn it on, but to quiet all of that which is not needed for the movement.

So let's step this back.

Maybe strengthening is not actually the problem. Maybe the glutes not firing is a signal of all the stuff that is and is not needed.

When we can get lower glute fibers reconnecting more effectively, when they begin to influence rotation really clearly, gait changes, balance improves. There's less side-to-side sway. People feel more grounded and curiously lighter and taller.

I was working with a client a month ago. We had a whole bunch of knee pain and we did not touch the knee at all. We focused in on the way the leg bone was moving in the hip socket, and as we did, the glutes came back online. And guess what happened with the knee? Her swelling very obviously came down over the course of an hour.

Pain came down over the course of an hour. Her legs felt lighter, solid, rooted. Curiously, she didn't say stronger, but she was moving around with an ease and a nimbleness that she didn't have at the beginning of the hour.

My point here is that this is not just a mechanical process, although what I've spoken about clearly is mechanical, but it's also about how someone is with their breath. If someone's bracing their ribcage, because when someone holds their breath, we can see how that changes their glute engagement when there are thorax. If their rib cage becomes rigid, it can alter pelvic movement. There's a relationship here between breath, pelvic floor, lats, glutes, obliques, and more.

If the breath is shallow or braced, it's common for the pelvic floor to change its tone, and people as they learn to tune into their pelvic floor can feel it. They can feel that correlation to how their glutes respond.

So said another way, we can see glute dysfunction as compensation, compensation that is more of a protection element. And remember how protection is nervous system driven.

So maybe from this angle, glute weakness is not glute weakness at all. Maybe it's a signal of threat and our body/mind is doing its absolute best to support us, asking us to bring more support, stability, and inner scaffolding. And as we do, time and time again, those glutes come back online. Breath becomes easier.

People feel lighter, rooted, grounded, the opposite of threat, the opposite of protection. Isn't that what we want?

So maybe try this. Instead of squeezing harder, instead of pushing aggressively through your feet and bridge, how about just feel your feet on the ground and actually extend through your hip?

Connect with your glutes and say, Hey, glutes, this is your job. Instead of forcing intensity, maybe explore a smaller movement that's just a little cleaner. Play with this idea of whispering, not shoving and forcing. Consider coordination first before intensity.

Because I don't think this is about stronger glutes by strengthening them, but rather it's intelligent glutes and restoring relationship in the hip.

Perhaps your glutes aren't lazy at all. Maybe they're actually screaming at you, trying to bring about clearer communication.

If this has been thought provoking and interesting and curious and it resonates with you, you wanna dig in more with me, come join me at truly, Power of Pure Movement, stronger and more engaged glutes. Four hours of live online training. You can also take it by recording, plus we'll be adding some extra goodies to make it a full five hours.

Check it out over at **functionalsynergy.com/glutes**. I'd love to see you there.