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DYNAMIC FITNESS TIPS

DF Tip #15: Cheap Fix for Back Pain



Some of my best friends are doctors.

Saying "some of my best friends are..." is the kiss of death, of course, and I admit that what follows does indeed contain a little dig at our white-coated friends. Nonetheless, it's true: some of my best friends are doctors, I love every one of them, and would place my health in their hands in a heartbeat.

Having said that, aren't doctors the worst??

Item: I've had the following interaction with fitness clients a good dozen times or so over the years. A client will come to me and complain of back pain. The pain is worst, they explain, when they lie on their stomachs, and virtually disappears when they lie on their sides and draw the knees towards the chest.

Each time I've heard this complaint I take the client through a magic little one-minute move called the kneeling hip flexor stretch, which I'll explain in a moment here. Guess what? Immediate relief. All twelve times. And that's after just a few moments with a gym drone like me -- a guy who, compared to your average MD, may as well have ordered his personal training cert from the back of the same matchbook cover with the picture of the cartoon duck saying "Draw Me!" And these were clients who, in a couple of cases, were contemplating surgery.



Draw Me!

Now I'm not saying "Doctors are dumb and I'm smart" (though if you want to go ahead and conclude that on your own, be my guest). Far from it. I just find it wall-climbingly irksome that somewhere in the 15-year curriculum for doctors there isn't a five-minute primer on Easing Low Back Pain through Hip Flexor Extensibility. After all, guess what ailment is quite literally the #1 health complaint in the civilized world?



Draw Me!

That's right -- back pain.

Yet not one of the people who came to see me had been told by their doctors, "Hey, try stretching your hip flexors." Long before that option came up, they'd been prescribed pain pills and given full-color brochures on the surgical options available to them for the low, low monthly payment of \$199.50 for a short 48 months!



Draw Me!

So you can see why I'm a little put out by the medical profession. BUT -- instead of impotently venting my frustration, let me do something about it and spread a dollop of wisdom.

Your hip flexors are the muscles that attach the front of your thighs to your pelvis. They're a series of tough, stringy muscles responsible for swinging your legs forward and up. If you stand, balance on your right foot, draw your left knee up towards your chest, and dig your fingers into the crease formed between your left thigh and hipbone, you'll feel your left hip flexor muscles doing their thing.

On any given day, whether you're active or not, your hip flexors take a pretty good pounding. If you walk, run, or do virtually anything athletic, your hip flexors are working pretty hard to pull your legs forward every time you take a step. If, on the other hand, you're sitting down all day, the hip flexors remain shortened the entire time you're sitting there driving or typing or watching TV. And chances are that unless you already know the kneeling hip flexor stretch (in which case, why even read this far, hotshot), you're not getting much flexibility work in this area either.

Combine the overstimulation from athletic endeavors, the shortened resting position, and the lack of flexibility in the area and you get a recipe for short, tight hip flexors, and -- you guessed it -- back pain.

You see, the hip flexors, naturally, connect to the hips. When they get tight, they pull the front edge of your pelvis down and forward when you stand, resulting in a rodeo-rider like, butt-sticking-out posture. With the pelvis tipped forward like this, it becomes impossible to stand straight without straining the lower back -- which, over time, can lead to chronic LBP. This is another example of the [Tall Ship](#) image from a few weeks ago: do anything often enough and the body starts to conform to that shape -- healthy or not. So if you sit a lot, which all of us do, you get short hip flexors and, sooner or later, a greater or lesser degree of LBP.

So instead of spending all your time stretching the low back (most peoples' immediate impulse when the back gives them trouble), give the Kneeling Hip Flexor Stretch a try:

- 1) Kneel down with your right foot behind you.
- 2) Step your left foot out in front of you.
- 3) Place your hands on your left knee.
- 4) Lunge forward onto your left foot so that your hips sink towards the floor.
- 5) Continue lunging forward until you feel a comfortable stretch in the front of your right hip. Press the top of your right foot into the floor. Hold for 10-20 seconds.
- 6) Stretch the right hand above your head and hold for another 20 seconds.
- 7) Repeat stretch with your left foot back.



This is the most effective hip flexor stretch I know -- it's easy, quick, and a heck of a lot cheaper than surgery and six months of physical therapy. I'm not saying it'll cure every case of low back pain, but it's definitely worth a try before you go under the knife.

Good luck, and have a great week—

Andrew

DF Tip #22: The Bare Truth



My wife **Heidi** takes a stripping class every Tuesday from 8-10 PM. The class she takes is called **S Factor**, though recently other such classes have popped up in gyms and dance studios across the country. Men aren't allowed in, but Heidi tells me that every week the teacher leads the students through a warm-up, followed by some intense muscle toning and ab work. She'll show them how to do a pole trick or two (there's a stripper's pole in the classroom), and then, one by one, the students perform for each other. The music and costumes vary -- students choose their own -- but they all wear six-inch heels that they acquire -- at a discount -- at a store on one of the seedier blocks of Hollywood Boulevard.

Who are these women (and what are their phone numbers, I hear my male readers ask)? Damaged, abused, man-hating, drug-addicted types? Hardly. In as far as there is an **S Factor** "type," the clientele appears to be upper-middle class and about as normal as you can get. Career women. Moms. CEOs. Contractors. Homemakers. A smattering of actresses and other industry types, this being LA; tall, short, young, old, skinny, chunky, black, white, fit, not. Your basic cross-section of female Angelenos with a few bucks of disposable income.

Okay, so when Heidi first expressed an interest in stripping, I'll admit I was a tad freaked out. Did she have some deep-seated need to strut her (excellent) stuff in front of strangers? Was she working through some issue I wasn't aware of, and why in the Sam Hill wasn't she happy spending her Tuesday nights with me watching Kiefer Sutherland shoot the bad guys on "[24](#)"?

Once my two main fears about the class were allayed (there are (1) no men and (2) no nudity in the classroom), and sensing in the dull recesses of my brain the possibility -- however remote -- that I might benefit in some peripheral way from Heidi's pursuits -- I decided to encourage Heidi to try it. All right, let's face it, I pretty much shoved her out the door.



Now Heidi's been at it for two years, and continues to love the class. It's a great workout, she loves the way it makes her feel, loves the sensuality and beauty of the movements. I've met some of her classmates (**S Factor** devotees bond quickly), and they all report new levels of strength, flexibility and endurance from the class. More importantly, however, the women report a greater sense of confidence and ease with themselves. Simply put, it makes them feel beautiful.

And yet, **S Factor** provokes some pretty extreme responses. When Heidi suggests to friends that they try it, she's often met with wide-eyed terror. One woman I know recently said she thought the class sounded "horrificing." The association of stripping with all things exploitative, objectifying, and degrading makes **S Factor** a tough sell to some people.

I'll admit it, it is pretty out there: groups of women of all ages, shapes, colors and creeds getting together, putting on ecstatic music, and stripping off most of their clothes while the other students watch, hooting and hollering in jubilant support. How Sapphic! The right wing shudders (while secretly wishing they could go watch).

But I think that **S Factor**, and classes like it, are kind of important. I think they're part of a kind of cultural breakthrough. True, I'm totally biased, and maybe I just want to hold onto the fantasy of my wife as a naughty nurse, but let me explain.



No one needs me to say that, as a culture, we're pretty screwed up when it comes to sex. Our religions tell us that sex is wrong and bad. Educators tell us that it's dangerous. The [Friday the 13th](#) movies tell teenagers that if they have sex, a mad killer in a hockey mask will come and hack them to pieces. Pop culture tells us that we're not sexy unless we conform to certain laughably unrealistic aesthetic standards, standards we abhor but somehow find ourselves admiring and aspiring to anyway. By adolescence, our sexuality is squashed, titillated, and pummeled to such an extent that we hear reports on a practically daily basis about the horrible ways people go off the skids because of some bizarre, recklessly-channeled sexual urge.

The women at **S Factor** -- bless their bustier-clad hearts -- are doing their part to undo all that. Short, tall, fat, thin, old, young -- they're claiming their birthright to their own sexiness, and I think it's long overdue. So much in our culture says that we aren't allowed to feel sexy unless we look a certain way or drive a certain car, that sexy women are stupid and vacuous, and these women are saying NO, anyone can do it. They're an army of lingerie-sporting regular women, screaming at us that, for the love of God, being sexy is a good and fun and harmless part of life. As Steve Martin says to the virginal Lily Tomlin in [All of Me](#), "Sex is one of the things that makes you feel like you're really living, like it's good to be alive!" I for one applaud their efforts. Not because we need more sexuality in our culture, but because we DO need to hear the message, louder and clearer and more often, that sexuality isn't just the domain of the six-foot and six-packed.



There is a fitness tip in all this, and it's this: amongst all the insecurity, guilt and self-loathing we feel about our exercise, we need to find a way to enjoy and celebrate our bodies for how they look and feel now, not just what they may someday become. I see people every day who exercise not to challenge themselves or to feel good but to punish their bodies for failing to live up to some rather arbitrary standard of beauty: they put in a workout that would shame Lance Armstrong, but they can't appreciate their accomplishment because there's still a dimple of cellulite on their right hamstring.

Of course, **S Factor** may or may not be for you (for one thing, you might be a man). But the larger point stands: fitness has many dimensions, not all of them as straightforward as building strength or endurance. Done correctly, exercise can coax you into places you don't usually allow yourself to go, pushing at limits that are not only physical, but emotional, psychological, and spiritual as well. I have clients who have never felt grounded who suddenly "arrive" in their bodies because of weight training. I once taught a dozen flighty, giggly teenaged girls with string bean bodies how to use broadswords, and I swear they were more confident and assertive by summer's end. Exercising to look great is as good a goal as any, but hunt around enough and you may discover something that nudges you of your comfort zone and gives you a renewed and expanded sense of who you are. Perhaps even more important than finding a type of exercise that can reshape your body is finding one that reshapes your body image.



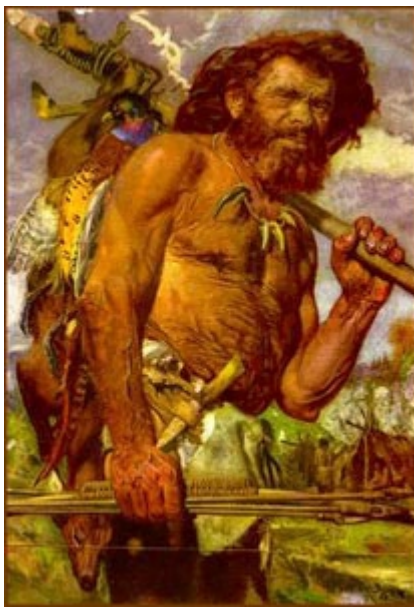
Have a great week!
Andrew

DF Tip #23: Look Out for Gurus!

This morning I was reading a well-traveled blog by an exercise guru (I'll call him David), who claims that when it comes to fitness, we've got it all -- or most of it, anyway -- wrong. There are very few topics he isn't willing to take on: fitness, genetics, dental care, the movie industry, economics, the Loch Ness Monster... Okay, not that last one. But it's clear that David fancies himself something of a Renaissance man.



Much of his writing on fitness is about what NOT to do: he hates steady-state cardio activity, he doesn't like high reps or high volume weight training, he doesn't believe in veganism or vegetarianism, doesn't believe in sports drinks or post-workout glycogen replacement in general, doesn't like weight machines. He's totally down on carbs and sugar. He thinks that many weight-room warhorses -- full-range bench presses and wide-grip lat pull-downs, as well as most abdominal exercises -- are dangerous.



In place of these chestnuts, he advocates what I'll call Cro-Magnon Fitness (he calls it something else) -- a training system based on his conception of the activity patterns of our hunter-gatherer ancestors: heavy, fast-paced training, one-arm/one-leg movements, low reps, heavy weights, and explosive movements. He favors jumping, leaping, and throwing medicine balls, movements that he contends mimic ancient, high-intensity activities like escaping predators and taking down prey. He likes eating meat and thinks grains are the scourge of the gastrointestinal world.

David isn't short on self-esteem. He spends one entry going into detail about the reaction a female salesclerk had upon seeing him in an Armani suit she was trying to sell him (SPOILER: her reaction was positive); another on the effect that his bounteous testosterone stores have on women, and, more distressingly, on dogs.

We get it: David is a hunk of virility, and if we'd only adhere to his principles of training, if only the misguided fitness industry would listen to him, then this country, nay, the world, could be populated by men and women whose mere essence drives the opposite sex, and much of the animal kingdom, into fits of uncontrollable lust.

Let me backpedal a bit before David's disciples, hip to the fact that I'm talking about their messiah, come to my house and expose me for the fitness-drink-swilling, carb-eating, long-distance running fitness hack that I apparently am. David does make some good points. He likes a lot of the same stuff I like in the gym. He rightly cautions against extremism and fanaticism in endurance sport. And at 6'1," 195 pounds, 8% body fat, and almost 70 years old (!), he's clearly found a system that works for him. The problem is that he takes the indisputable fact of his own success and assumes that his methods will work for... pretty much everyone. That's where he and I part ways.

Anyone with even a rudimentary understanding of fitness can look at the guy and see that he isn't well suited to long-distance anything. He's a mesomorph, a thick-boned, fast-twitch muscle guy, good at short duration exercise and explosive movement (he once played pro baseball), and not much on endurance. So in a way it makes sense that he would benefit from a system of weight training that is particularly suited to that type of physique -- to wit, very high intensity, heavy weights, low volume -- and abhor the kinds of activities that don't agree with this body type -- namely, endurance sport.



But that's no reason to dismiss endurance sport activities -- and the reams of scientific data that support their benefits -- altogether. Nor does it mean there aren't scores of people out there who benefit from long-distance running, or cycling, or swimming. There are: I've known a few thousand of them personally. But David doesn't talk about them; instead, he takes a head-shaking, I-told-you-so pleasure in posting anecdotes about the rare occasion when an apparently-healthy endurance athlete dies from a heart attack while training.

David's advice on weight training is equally short-sighted. In his blog, and in interviews (which are also accessible via his website), he carefully explains how you only need to lift weights twice a week, performing one hard set per body part per week, using a carefully-worked out system of ascending weight and descending repetitions. He claims that using this system three times a week for forty minutes a session is all that is needed for optimal fitness.

I'm sure many of my clients would love to be in and out of the gym in thirty-five minutes, just twice a week. I'm sure many of them would prefer not to do the three or four grueling sets of squats or deadlifts or chinups that leave many of them sore for days afterwards. And I'd be happy to prescribe such a workout regimen if I believed for a minute that it would be effective.

If only. In practice, the truth is that almost everyone needs more stimulation than David recommends. In my experience, this manner of weight training leads to a particularly precarious combination of under- and over-training: the muscles aren't trained with enough volume or frequency to stimulate growth, but during workouts themselves, the tissues are subjected to such extreme stress that the trained muscles wind up either injured, or at the very least, more vulnerable to injury outside the gym, so a trainee will wind up wrenching their back tying their shoes or doing some equally innocuous physical activity.

Moreover, David's revolutionary ideas have already been advanced, touted, and largely relegated to footnote status in most fitness circles, for many of the same reasons I go into above, starting as long as three decades ago. [Arthur Jones](#), the entrepreneur behind the Nautilus craze, and the late bodybuilding champion [Mike Mentzer](#) both advocated similar training systems back in the 80's. Today, there's a good-natured kook on the Internet who calls this training system -- I kid you not -- the "Doggrapp" method.

It's not that what they say is worthless. Like any other training technique, heavy, high intensity training has its place. But just because this training system has proved useful for a handful of high-profile athletes does NOT mean that all other training systems -- which have been tried and tested and proven effective by athletes and workaday exercisers everywhere -- are useless and should be thrown out.



If I've learned nothing else in my years as a trainer and athlete, it's that you can't use a cookie cutter to create fitness programs. As ever, it's different strokes for different folks. Sure, David gestures vaguely at the notion of variety in training, but only within the strict parameters of his very limiting recommendations. Maybe some of what's worked for him will work for you, too. But what's misleading about his points, and what I caution all twelve of my readers against, is the one-sidedness of it. He sternly steers us away from one type of fanaticism while slyly advocating another: no machines! No endurance activity! No grains! In pointing out the dangers of overdoing aerobic activity, he

effectively makes the point that not all exercise modalities are for everyone -- but then immediately contradicts his own well-taken point by trying to sell us on his own ONE TRUE WAY to fitness. As I've said many times before, there are simply too many bodies out there, and too many useful, effective, and, frankly, really fun ways of exercising, for one system to work optimally for everyone, forever.

Another word of caution while I'm on it. The systems that fitness gurus advance are, inevitably, a repackaged form of something others have been doing for a long time. Functional training is a souped-up version of the calisthenics we all did in gym class. Balance training is something that circus performers did centuries ago. Spinning classes? Boxing? Tae Bo? Kettleballs, for the love of Pete? There's value in all these things, but let's not pretend that no one ever thought of them before. These guys might have gone sailing in the Atlantic, and maybe they'll come back with a story or two, but that doesn't make them Columbus.



The lesson here is that there's very little that's new under the sun: you've just got to keep searching till you find the thing that's right for YOUR body and YOUR goals, right now. That's why one of my main principles -- in as far as I can say I have any principles -- is to keep exploring, keep challenging yourself, keep expanding your physical repertoire. Sure, go ahead and take up David's principles for awhile. See how they work for you. Then ignore it all and join a crew club for a year. Then do spinning classes. Cycle Alaska. Then take up competitive power lifting.

The body is too complex and fascinating an organism, too inherently curious and adaptable to stay satisfied with one exercise modality for long. Explore long enough and eventually, you'll become something akin to a guru of your own physiology. Maybe you'll stumble on a series of long-forgotten exercises that you become convinced is by far the best and most effective system in existence, and why has no one thought of it before?

At that point, you might feel inclined to start your own blog about how you've discovered the ONE TRUE WAY to get fit and tell everyone about it. All I'll say is if you do, keep your dukes up.

Have a great week,
Andrew

Chokin' in Chile

I just got this a couple of days ago from a reader in Chile (Chile! I love the internet!):

Hi! I love this blog. I have a question for you. I live in a Santiago, Chile, where the pollution gets so bad that they sometimes recommend that you only go outside if you have to. The only places to go running are on busy streets. I don't mind that, but I have read that it's horrible for your lungs to exercise near car fumes. Instead of running I thought I could go on long, brisk walks. Would I still be taking in unhealthy amounts of pollution? And if the answer is that I should definitely be exercising indoors, do you have any good indoor workouts? As it is, I run in place, I do high aerobic dancing, jumping jacks, anything I can to get my heart rate up. Any suggestions? I would rate myself a medium on fitness level and I have no medical problems at all. Thank you so much!

Mamacita Chilena

MC: Hi. As a guy who lives in LA -- and a lifetime asthmatic, no less -- I know all about trying to exercise in places where the air is lousy.

Unless you're incredibly deconditioned, which doesn't seem to be the case, let's forget about brisk walking as a legitimate form of exercise. I know I've just casually slaughtered a sacred cow with those 11 words, but it needs to be said. Saunter into any hospital and you'll see that people who are almost DEAD can walk. Walking is fun, it's stimulating, it's better than sitting around on the couch, but it doesn't really challenge the body unless you're charging up a hill with all you've got (which no one does). Walking is recreation, really, like playing pool or ping-pong: you're on your feet, you've moving a little, but you're not sweating, and you're not challenging the body in a meaningful, sustained way.

Now don't stop doing something you enjoy just because I said it's not really exercise. It's still good for you. Just add other forms of exercise that are more challenging, such as running or cycling outdoors.

As to the air-quality issue, basically, if I work out outdoors, which I love to do, I keep it close to places that are green. So around here that means cycling on certain roads and bike paths and avoiding others (a supreme irony of the otherwise terrific LA river bike path is that it runs alongside Interstate 5 and crosses the 134 -- two of the busiest thoroughways on the West Coast!). Thank god for Griffith Park, which is a huge and very green oasis in the middle of this concrete jungle. So one obvious recommendation is to choose your roads or venues wisely. I read somewhere that air quality improves exponentially each 10 meters you move away from the side of a heavily-trafficked road. Don't know whether that's right, but it makes sense based on my limited recollection from 9th-grade science class of the way gases diffuse. You mention that city streets are really your only option, so that solution might not help you much.

Your second consideration, then, is to choose the time of day that you exercise with care. If I can get myself out on the road during the 6 AM hour on Sunday morning, cycling in LA is an absolute dream come true. Just me, those big, wide streets, and a couple of other cyclists beaming back at me as if to say, "Yes, brother, it's real, and I'm feeling it too." And because there's no traffic, the air is about as clear as it's going to be all week. I try to get back home before serious church-going traffic begins, but LA is so full of faithless heathens that even the city's whole 8-AM-service-attending population barely slows me down. Should you have other plans on Sunday morning, there are other lower-smog time periods during the week, and clearly you want to choose those rather than the hours surrounding heavy traffic times. Overall, early morning is probably best.

Failing those options, indoor workouts can be very effective, convenient, and time-efficient. The modes you mention above are useful, but potentially mind-numbing: doing a thousand jumping jacks while staring at the picture of your Aunt Lily bobbing up and down on the mantle can start to feel gerbil-on-a-wheely and faintly ridiculous after awhile.

Among indoor cardiovascular training methods, I'd suggest is interval-style calisthenics over anything steady-state for many reasons. I've written a lot about sprinting in the past, the body-weight exercise circuit I recommend here is really another variation on the old 'work hard and short, rest, repeat' saw. I suggested one possible training circuit in [Stealing Workouts](#) a couple of days ago, but you can really choose almost any multi-joint upper- or lower- body moves you want, and plug them into the formula: 30 seconds of intense work on the first movement, 15 seconds rest, 30 seconds intense work on the second movement, 15 seconds rest, and so on, rotating through the moves till you've burned through whatever time you have to work on that day (I call that the "Santana" interval, because I learned it from combat-trainer J.C. Santana). You can also use the 20-second/10-second work/rest interval I wrote about in my "Tabata" entry some time ago. Or make up your own interval, tell me how well it works, and I'll name it after you. 1 minute of work/2 minutes of rest can work, too, if you're going all-out for that minute. All these parameters are more effective all around -- for fat loss, cardiovascular benefit, and muscle-building -- than virtually any form of steady-state aerobic work.

Some possible moves to plug in are bodyweight squats, step-ups, split squats, lunges, lunges with dumbbell curls and/or presses, Bulgarian split squats, boxing punches (straight punches or uppercuts or hooks; resisted using elastic bands), pushups, squat thrusts, squat thrusts with pushups and jumps, squat jumps, sprawls, pushups, bench dips, bench jumpups, stationary bike intervals, front kicks or side kicks, dumbbell curl and presses, elastic band presses, elastic band rows, elastic band overhead presses or overhead squats, elastic band curls, any ab work, planks, punching bag work of all kinds, jump rope intervals, jump rope intervals doing doubles, crosses, 1-2 pattern, etc.

A stopwatch with a clearly legible face, a sturdy bench, a couple of elastic bands, a jump rope, some kettleballs or dumbbells, and you'll be all set for thousands of different possible combinations. Add a good-quality punching bag, gloves, and a stationary bike, and the possibilities are pretty much endless. Since you're working with time rather than reps, you can control the intensity throughout the workout, so you'll really never outgrow the workout.

These workouts are very tough, and 20 minutes is a LONG time working this way. I'd advise a fairly easy warmup, 10 minutes of this kind of work at first, rotating 5 exercises, then 5 minutes of stretching. Work up to longer sessions and alternate with outdoor exercise on days when the air is clearer!

Good luck, and thanks for the question!
Andrew