Why Stretching Your Hamstrings Won't Fix Your Back

In over 30 years of helping people live pain-free lives, I've observed that 60–70% of the low back pain I treat originates with tight, short muscles on the front of the body. These muscles are the quadriceps and the psoas.

How can muscles that don't hurt cause pain on the other side of the body? The quads and psoas are hip flexors. In simple terms, they help you bend forward. When they're too short and tight, they pull your pelvis forward. That tilt compresses the low back, and the result is pain. The pain you feel is the symptom. The cause is often the hip flexors.

A Simple Self-Test

Lie flat on your back. After a while, this position often makes the pain worse. Now bend your knees so your feet are flat on the floor. This takes the strain off the quadriceps and psoas. Does your back feel better? If so, it's a good sign tight hip flexors are involved.

Correcting the Cause

Bending your knees eases the symptom. To correct the cause, start stretching your quadriceps and psoas.

Quadriceps: An easy runner's stretch works well. Stand and reach back to grab your ankle. Gently pull your heel toward your butt. You should feel the stretch along the front of your thigh. Hold for 30 seconds, then switch sides.

Psoas: A simple standing or kneeling lunge is an easy way to stretch the psoas. Hold for 30 seconds on each side.

Do both stretches about 5 times a day. Keep them gentle. A stretch should feel good. If it hurts your back or knee, it's too deep, and stretching too deeply can make back pain worse. Be patient. Retraining these muscles can take a couple of months or more.

Leave Your Hamstrings Alone

Avoid stretching your hamstrings while you work on this. When the pelvis tilts forward, the hamstrings feel tight. But it's an overstretched tight. Think of an overstretched rubber band. It's tight, but stretching it further only makes it tighter.

The Bottom Line

Consistent, gentle stretching of the quadriceps and psoas can dramatically reduce or eliminate low back pain for many people. If your pain persists, see your health care provider. Get checked first if your pain began after an injury, radiates down your leg, or comes with numbness, tingling, or weakness.

You can read more about low back pain and many other conditions in my book *Live Pain Free: Eliminate Chronic Pain Without Drugs or Surgery*, available on Amazon. You may also enjoy *Yoga for Pain Relief*, winner of the 2018 Benjamin Franklin Gold Award.

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