



Image: Tracy

## Recovery Tool Box

Foam rollers are all the rage, but what do they do and should open water swimmers use them?

In recent years, the foam roller has become a popular recovery tool for athletes, and many open water swimmers have adopted these tools. Foam rollers, as well as lacrosse balls, tennis balls, and massage guns, are claimed to ease soreness and help athletes bounce back faster after tough workouts and intense races.

But do these tools really help?

Yes, says physical therapist [Heather Roka](#), a member of Southern Masters Swimmers. An accomplished ultramarathon swimmer who has completed a double crossing of the English Channel, Roka knows a thing or two about muscle soreness after many hours in the water and says “there’s plenty of research that shows these tools can help.”

## What Foam Rolling Does

Similar to how the strong touch of a skilled massage therapist can relieve tension and soothe away soreness, foam rolling triggers increased blood flow, which helps your body repair the tiny tears that can develop in muscles during intense exercise.

- Foam rolling and other types of pressure-based tools help:
- Loosen tight muscles, increasing your flexibility and

range of motion

- Reduce muscle soreness and alleviate fatigue
- Speed recovery by encouraging blood flow to tight or sore areas to help with healing
- Release tight fascia—the connective tissue that surrounds muscles—to relax tension and eliminate adhesions that could be restricting movement or causing pain
- Stimulate nerve receptors that release endorphins to alleviate pain

Foam rollers are great for bigger muscles such as your lats, quads, and hamstrings, Roka says. But for smaller muscles in your upper body and shoulders, rolling on a tennis ball or a lacrosse ball often works better to pinpoint the sore spot, allowing you to really dig in and work the problem area.

## Getting Started With Foam Rolling

If you're new to the concept of foam rolling, Roka recommends connecting with a physical therapist or trainer who's well versed in foam rolling to ensure you've got the right tools and know-how to apply them well.

"There's really no prescription on how much you need to do for it to be effective," Roka says. It all depends on which body part is tight and your own tolerance for the sensation of rolling out a knot, which can sometimes feel a little uncomfortable at first.

Some foam rollers have a smooth surface, but others have a ridged surface. Roka recommends starting with the smooth-surfaced type. The wider, flatter surface will distribute pressure across a larger area, which usually causes less discomfort.

"The big thing with foam rolling is you don't want it to be so painful that you tighten up," as that defeats the purpose of

rolling and can actually make the issue with tightness and soreness worse, Roka explains.

Instead, the focus should be on relaxing and stretching out.

“Take your time. Don’t rush over any areas, and search for points that feel like trigger points,” she says. These are areas that are extra tight. Spend a little longer pushing on those areas to help release the muscle knot.

Roka recommends rolling out for about 90 seconds to two minutes after a long training swim to decrease soreness and improve recovery. You can linger on trigger points an additional 30 to 60 seconds. Just be gentle and pay attention to your body.

She also cautions that if you have issues with uncontrolled blood pressure, it’s always good to check in with a healthcare provider before you start foam rolling “because foam rolling can cause both high and low blood pressure.” This is related to how the pressure activates the central nervous system.

You should also see a doctor if you experience more pain after foam rolling than you did before. “That’s not a good sign,” Roka says. Lingering or problematic pain points should also be investigated to prevent further injury.

But for the normal soreness of day-to-day training, adopting a regular practice of foam rolling can “make it easier to get up and turn around for another day of training,” Roka says. And that’s music to any Masters swimmer’s ears.

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