

Iliopsoas Release

The Iliopsoas Release allows students to release and gain control of the iliopsoas muscle, a very important core muscle. The exercise involves flattening the lower back while lifting one leg and then slowly lowering it down. The exercise is a demanding movement for the iliopsoas muscle. Students should be comfortable with the Arch & Flatten, Back Lift, and Arch & Curl before learning the Iliopsoas Release.

EXERCISE DESCRIPTION

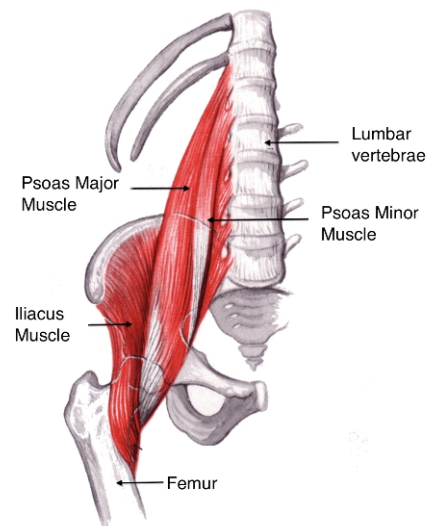
Starting Position: Lie on your back with your knees bent, feet on the floor, and arms lying by your sides. Stretch your right leg straight down on the floor, and bring your right hand up behind your head.

Movement: Inhale into your lower belly and then exhale, strongly flattening your lower back down into the floor. Keep strongly flattening your back while you do the entire exercise. Tuck your chin and curl up, and at the same time, lift your right leg off the floor about 12 inches. Keeping your back flattened down into the floor, lower your head and leg down as slowly as you possibly can. You can repeat this one more time with the right leg if you wish.

When you're done, practice this movement with your left side.

ANATOMY OF THE ILIOPSOAS RELEASE

The psoas muscle, formally called the *psoas major*, is a very important core muscle. The psoas attaches the lumbar vertebrae to the lesser trochanter, near the head of the femur. The psoas muscle is often grouped together with the *iliacus*, and together they are referred to as the *iliopsoas*. Due to its location deep within the core of the body, the iliopsoas is difficult to feel with your hands and to sense internally.



The iliopsoas performs several actions:

- The iliopsoas **flexes the hip**, meaning that when it contracts it brings the knee in toward the stomach. If you spend a lot of time sitting, your iliopsoas is likely tight as a result of spending so much time in a shortened state.
- The iliopsoas **laterally rotates the hip**, allowing you to stand like a ballet dancer with your feet pointed outward. Dancers often have a great deal of tightness in their iliopsoas.
- The iliopsoas **adducts the hip**, bringing the leg in toward the center of the body. If you squeeze your knees together, you are engaging your adductors.
- Because of its attachments to the lumbar vertebrae, the iliopsoas contributes to **lateral tilting of the pelvis** (hiking the hips up one at a time) and **lateral flexion of the spine** (bending the spine to one side).

The most common condition resulting from a tight iliopsoas is back pain. When your iliopsoas is tight and you are standing up, the contraction of the muscle brings the lower back into hyperlordosis, or a greater than normal degree of arching. This arching of the lower back compresses the vertebrae and brings all of the lower back muscles into a shortened state. The result is muscular tension and pain, disc problems, sciatica, and a tendency to throw the lower back into spasm.

A tight iliopsoas also causes or contributes to a number of other conditions, including hip pain, groin pain, uneven leg length, scoliosis, instability in the core of the body, and limited flexibility in the lower back.

In the Iliopsoas Release, the back must remain strongly flattened down into the floor throughout the movement in order to keep the iliopsoas engaged. The iliopsoas contracts as the leg lifts up, and slowly releases as the leg lowers down. The continuous engagement of the iliopsoas, achieved by pressing the lower back down into the floor, is what makes this movement so effective.

Breathing in the Iliopsoas Release: The student should first inhale deeply down into their lower belly, then exhale and flatten their lower back down into the floor. The student can then breathe as needed for the rest of the exercise.

CONDITIONS HELPED BY THE ILIOPSOAS RELEASE

The Iliopsoas Release helps to alleviate the following conditions by releasing involuntary muscle contraction in the iliopsoas:

- Tightness and pain in the lower back
- Tightness and pain in the hips
- Groin pain
- Hyperlordosis
- Disc problems in the lumbar spine
- Sciatica
- Scoliosis
- Functional leg length discrepancy

HOW TO TEACH THE ILIOPSOAS RELEASE

Get the student in their starting position. Instruct the student to lie on their back with their knees bent, feet on the floor, and arms lying by their sides. The student should then stretch their right leg straight down on the floor, bring their right hand up behind their head, and let their elbow fall out to the side.

Invite the student to close their eyes. Closing their eyes removes all the visual information that their brain would otherwise have to process. Keeping the eyes closed allows the student to focus completely on their internal sensations.

Teach the leg lifting movement. Instruct the student to take a full inhale down into their belly. Then as they exhale, the student should flatten their lower back down into the floor, trying to hollow out their belly. Then the student should tuck their chin and lift up their head at the same time as lifting up their right leg. They only need to lift their leg about one foot off the floor. They should be pressing their lower back strongly down into the floor as they lift their leg up. When the student is ready, they can lower their head and leg down to the floor as slowly as possible. They should press their lower back down into the floor the entire time that they lower their head and leg down. When their head and leg reach the floor, they can completely relax. They may repeat this movement on their right side one more time if they wish.

Talk the student through the movement using their left side. Ask them to notice the differences they feel between their right and left sides.

Modification: With the working leg fully extended, this is an intense movement for the iliopsoas. If it is too intense, or if the student is finding it impossible to keep their lower back flattened down into the floor throughout the movement, you can teach them a

modification. Modifying the Iliopsoas Release consists simply of decreasing the weight of the leg by keeping it bent instead of extending it. The bend at the hip will also make it easier for the student to keep their back flattened. Have the student begin in their neutral starting position, lying on their back with both legs bent and feet on the floor. They should bring their right hand up behind their head and let their elbow rest out to the side. Instruct them to inhale down into their belly, then as they exhale, they should flatten their back down into the floor. Then they can lift up their head at the same time as their bent leg, while keeping their back strongly flattened down into the floor. Keeping their back flattened, they can lower their head and their bent leg back down to their starting position as slowly as possible. When this movement becomes easy for the student, they can slide their right foot a little farther forward (keeping it bent, but not bent as much as their left leg) and use that as their starting position. Gradually they will get closer to having their working leg completely extended.

Consideration:

Remember the principle of neuromuscular learning that we talked about with the Side Curl: the nervous system will best remember the last thing that it learned. So, if your student has one side of their lower back or one hip that is tighter or more painful than the other, start by having them do this exercise with their looser or less painful side. It will feel easier for them to do the movement with their better side, so it will be easier for them to learn it correctly and feel how it should be felt. Then they can do the exercise with their tighter side, and they'll notice how it feels different. By doing the tighter side second, the release that they feel on their tighter side will be more likely to stick with them.

If you determine that it would be beneficial for your student to practice their right and left sides in a certain order, tell your student to do them in this order at home, and explain to them why it's important.

Common mistakes:

The most common mistake is not keeping the lower back flattened through the entire exercise. Keeping the lower back pressed strongly down into the floor keeps the iliopsoas engaged; contracting as the leg lifts up, and very slowly releasing as the leg lowers down. Keeping the lower back pressed strongly down into the floor throughout the exercise is what makes this movement so effective.

Since this can be an intense movement, some students will rush through the release. Instruct your student to count to eight (or more) as they lower their leg down to make sure they are releasing slowly enough.

The iliopsoas is typically a very difficult muscle for most people to sense and control. The more often they practice the Iliopsoas Release, the more sensory-motor awareness they will gain. Tell them to be patient; it can take some time to gain control of the iliopsoas, but it is worth it!

The following is an example of how I teach the Iliopsoas Release:

Lie down on the floor on your back. Bend your knees and rest your feet on the floor, a comfortable hip width distance apart. Now, keep your left leg where it is, and just stretch your right leg straight down on the floor.

Bring your right hand up behind your head and let your elbow rest out to the side. Take a big inhale down into your lower belly, and then as you exhale, strongly press your lower back into the floor. Try to get the feeling of hollowing out your belly. Then tuck your chin and start lifting your head off the floor so that you're curling up, and at the same time, lift your right leg off the floor. Press your lower back down into the floor as you lift up your leg. Your leg doesn't have to come up very high—about a foot off the floor. Now, keep pressing your lower back down into the floor, and lower your leg and your head down to the floor as slowly and with as much control as you possibly can.

This is a pretty intense movement for your iliopsoas, so don't overdo it. You can do this one more time if you want to. Start by inhaling into your lower belly, and then as you exhale, strongly press your lower back into the floor. Try to get the feeling of hollowing out your belly. Then start curling up, and at the same time, lift your right leg off the floor. Keep pressing your lower back down into the floor as you lift your leg up. Your leg doesn't have to come up very high. Now, keep pressing your lower back down into the floor, and release your leg and your head down to the floor as slowly as you possibly can. When your leg reaches the floor, you can take your hand out from behind your head, and completely relax with your right leg extended.

Let's do this movement on the left side now. Bend your right knee and slowly slide your right foot up so that both knees are pointing up toward the ceiling and your feet are hip width distance apart. Then slide your left foot down on the floor and straighten your left leg. Bring your left hand up behind your head and let your elbow rest out to the side.

(Teach the movement sequence on left side.)