

Yoga for Dancers—In Which We Revisit The Hamstrings

by Anna Rain

As I wrote in the Winter 2010 newsletter, keeping the hamstrings long and stretched not only keeps your legs healthier, but long hamstrings are also more likely to keep the pelvis correctly in line, which in turn assists in the ease and lengthening of the low back. Now I'll present some work you can do to stretch the hamstrings in a focused manner (this is most definitely in the "Use it or Lose it" category).

Before you do this sequence of poses, review in the Winter 2010 issue: how to engage the quadriceps (the muscles on the front of the thigh). Our bodies follow the laws of physics. If a muscle is to release, another muscle must engage to provide the necessary space. Before you can begin to address the length of the hamstrings, you must first be able to suck your quadriceps into the thigh bone and firm the front thighs completely. Remember, this is not the same as "locking" your knees.

When you work with these poses, do pay careful attention to your body, and see that you work at the level that addresses your specific condition. Correct action in a preliminary phase of a pose is infinitely better (physically and emotionally) than incorrect action in a more advanced phase. Note: none of these poses should be practiced during the menstrual cycle. Having the legs up puts pressure on the abdomen, hindering the flow.

Legs up the wall

When we spend the day sitting or standing (and that would be almost everyone, I'm thinking), gravity causes blood to collect in the legs. This simple inversion passively drains blood from the legs; it's an excellent pose to do at the end of your working day to restore equilibrium to your circulatory system.

L i e on your right side, with your buttock bones touching a wall and your spine perpendicular to the wall (see photo near right). (This is conceptually



challenging for many of my students. Look at the picture, try it a few times, and you'll get more facile with the movement.) Swing your legs up the wall, roll onto your back, and have your feet about eight inches apart. With your hands, lift your head and see if you're symmetrical: Does your body come straight out from the wall? Or is your torso skewed to one side or the other? Straighten yourself out so that each side of your body—left and right—is as even as possible.

Now look at your legs. Can you straighten your legs and still keep your buttock bones on the wall? Most people who do not have a regular hamstring lengthening practice can't. If not, scoot away from the wall until you can engage your quadriceps and straighten your legs (see photo below right). NB: If your legs are more than about thirty degrees from upright, you'll do better work for yourself if you move to the next pose: Leg up the wall.

Stretch out through the inner heels and fully engage the feet. This action is like flexing the feet, but you'll see in the photo that the ball of the foot—the base of the big toe—also stretches away from the leg (see left hand photo on next page). Remember, for the hamstrings to be able to lengthen fully, the quadriceps must be engaged. You can get a (less desirable) passive hamstring stretch in this pose, however, if the quadriceps are released.

Check your head. Is your neck long and your jaw relaxed? If you notice your chin pointing toward the ceiling, put a blanket under your head to keep the neck soft and long. This is important: release your chin toward your throat and soften the jaw completely. The arms can be in any of these positions: hands resting on the abdomen; arms at side, palms



up; arms overhead with elbows softly bent.

Last check: have you softened everything but the quadriceps and the inner heels? See particularly that the abdomen is not engaged in any way. Part of the work we do in a yoga practice is to isolate certain muscles. In a pose conscientiously practiced, those muscles engage (correctly!) and everything else is soft and passive. If you are gripping other places in your body (abdomen, jaw, eyes), you are hindering the intent and benefit of the pose.

Stay here for five to ten minutes. Longer is great. Not only is this pose good for your legs (it can ease and prevent varicose veins, among other things), but it also helps your heart in that the heart is relieved of pumping blood—against gravity—from your legs. In “legs up the wall,” the back benefits too: your back is supported, aligned, and not bearing weight. (Aside: For the superlative back care pose, lie on the floor with your calves on a chair. When your back “goes out,” lie this way to calm the spasms, for hours, if need be.) When you travel, use “legs up the wall” to lessen the effects of jet lag on both ends of your journey.

When you are ready to take them in, here are some more refined actions to consider. As you engage the quadriceps, notice the sensation in your hamstrings. Do you feel a lot of pull either at the buttock bone or behind the knee? See if you can direct the sensation to the middle of the back of the thigh: lengthen from the middle of the thigh toward the buttock bone; and from the middle of the thigh toward the back of the knee. Keep the groins (at the very top of the thigh, in this pose, the part of the inner thigh closest to the floor) soft and separate from each other, right groin releasing to the right and to the wall, and left groin releasing to the left. As you are able, broaden the backs of the thighs and spread the muscles horizontally as well as vertically.

A variation for the end of your time in the

pose: bend the knees, and take the soles of the feet together, letting the knees fall to the side. This is a passive hip opener that hits one set of muscles that govern the flexibility of our hip rotation.

Leg up the Wall

We progress to a focused stretch of the hamstrings for those who are particularly stiff. You’ll work one leg at a time for several minutes, allowing the muscles to release gradually.

Find a door where you can take one leg up the frame of the door and have one leg straight on the floor (see photo below right)]. Take some time to see you are adjusted and square to the angles of the floor and wall: torso in line? hips square? (The hip of the up leg tends to move toward the waist. Resist that, and move the hip away from the waist, toward the wall.) This poses works only when both legs are straight! If you are so tight in the hamstrings that straightening the legs feels impossible, then get as close to straight as you can and work in thirty second intervals of engaging the quadriceps, moving toward straight.

Spend at least five minutes on each side, seeing that all in your body is relaxed except the quadriceps and the inner heels. As best you can (see more refined actions in “Legs up the wall”), make the backs of the thighs broad and long.

After diligent practice of these hamstring lengthening poses, we can move on to a more challenging pose which brings correct alignment and action of the abdomen. That’s a hint! Next issue’s pose will only be possible and/or make sense if you work these first!

Anna Rain is a certified Iyengar yoga instructor. Her latest earworm is “Rebecka Ridinghooe,” as interpreted by her band, Hot Toddy.



Photos courtesy the author.