

BE WELL

## Support Your Ankles

By Debbie DeAngelo  
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Our ankles work hard each day, yet the only time we give them a second thought is if we twist or injure them. As with other joints in the body, there's a host of activity that occurs at the junction of the lower leg and foot. The ankles bend and flex as we move in order to provide stability and balance. This motion is in two

primary directions. When you push your foot down, it's called plantar flexion, and when you pull your foot up, it's referred to as dorsiflexion. This hinge-like joint consists of bones, tendons, ligaments, nerves, blood vessels, muscles, and a fluid filled sac. With so many components, and being tasked with bodily mobility, it would benefit us to support the joint that supports us.

### **Build Strong Ankles**

Mobility and strength of the ankles are often sacrificed as we age, which largely contributes to injuries. The constant impact of walking, as well as activities like running and racket sports, makes our ankles prone to damage. Conditioning the lower leg muscles minimizes the chance of this occurring. Strong ankle musculature helps you to withstand greater force without succumbing to trauma. Additionally, it can lower the likelihood of shin splints and Achilles tendonitis.

Ready to get started with stretching and strengthening? Before performing these exercises, you'll want to warm up with at least 10 minutes of a low impact activity, such as walking or riding a stationary bike. Also, if you have a history of injuries, surgeries or medical problems with your feet, ankles, or lower legs, be sure to consult a physical therapist.

**Golf Ball Massage** (Tennis ball or frozen water bottle can be substituted. Targets the plantar fascia.)

- Sit on a chair with both feet in contact with the floor.
- Roll a golf ball back and forth beneath the arch of each foot for a few minutes.

**Towel Stretch** (Targets calf and heel.)

- Sit in a chair with both legs out in front of you (heels in contact with floor).
- Loop a long towel around the ball of one foot and grasp the ends of the towel with your hands.
- Keep the leg straight while slowly and gently pulling the towel toward you for 30 seconds. Relax for 30 seconds.
- Repeat 5-10 times on each leg.

**Foot and Ankle Flex** (Targets entire foot and lower leg.)

- Stand in stocking or bare feet with feet parallel and just under shoulder width apart.
- Lift one heel off the floor slowly (ball of foot and toes should maintain contact with floor) and then lower it to a flat foot again. Be sure to allow your knee to bend forward as you lift the heel.
- Alternate feet as you're performing this 10 times on each foot.

**Ankle Alphabet** (Targets ankle mobility.)

- Sit in a chair and rest your foot on a stool or recline on your back on the couch with your foot propped on a pillow.
- Using your foot, trace the 26 letters of the alphabet in the air. Repeat with the opposite foot.

**Calf Stretch** (Targets calf.)

- Stand on the edge of a step while holding onto the railing for balance.
- Lower the heel of one foot slowly and hold the stretch for 10 seconds. Rest for 10 seconds.
- Repeat 5-10 times with each foot.

**Calf Raise** (Targets calf.)

- Stand on the edge of a step while holding onto the railing for balance.
- Raise yourself up slowly onto the balls of both feet simultaneously and then slowly lower your heels to neutral.
- Repeat 10 times.

**Single Leg Stand** (Targets shin and calf.)

- Stand in front of a support surface such as a wall or countertop while wearing sneakers. For balance, place both hands on the support surface.
- Lift one foot a few inches off the floor by bending the knee.
- Remove hands from the support surface, replacing them if you lose your balance.
- Work up to holding this stance for 30 seconds. Rest for 30 seconds.
- Repeat for a total of three on each leg.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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