How to Regain and Maintain Hip Mobility

Yesterday, I made a case for the necessity of good hip mobility in, well, everyone. Athletes will get faster, stronger, and more powerful. Lifters will be able to lift more weight and squat heavier without rounding the lower back. Regular folks will spare their lower back from the stress of chronic sitting and bending over to pick things up. Extensive hip mobility will improve your love life (seriously, think about it – hip thrust, range of motion!), your deadlift, your Grok squat, and your posture. If you own a set of hips, the ability to traverse their full range of motion will improve your life in many ways. They are the fulcrum upon which most activity depends. Treat them well, keep them well lubed and tuned up, and you will reap the benefits and reduce your chance of injury. That much is pretty clear by now.

So, how do you do it? How do you get hip mobility, and how do you maintain it?

Before you launch into a series of drills and exercises, it’s important to understand exactly what I mean by hip mobility. I briefly went over it yesterday, but here’s a short exercise you can do right now to get the feeling for your hips.

Stand up (or remain standing if you’ve taken my advice to heart and set up a standup workstation).

Pick an object on the ground, or place one there. A shoe, a hat, a piece of paper, anything will work.

Now, pick up the object. But wait – don’t squat down to pick it up, and don’t just bend over at the waist. Erase the word “bend” from your vocabulary. You aren’t bending; you’re reaching back with your hips.
Stick your butt backwards, as if you were reaching for a stool to sit down. All the while, maintain a tight lumbar spine. Keep your back straight, in other words. Don’t round your back. Keep your legs nearly straight, too, just enough to unlock your knees.

Stick your hips back until you can grab the object. Grab it, then come back up by reversing the hip motion. Thrust your hips forward, as if you were performing a NSFW activity. Um, yeah. Thrust your hips forward by pulling against the ground with your heels. Squeeze your glutes for good measure, too. Feel that pull in your hamstrings and glute muscles as you draw power from your heels planted firmly against the ground?

That’s how you use your hips, and half the battle is won. Simply visualizing this usage of your hips will get you pretty far and improve your hip mobility (because now you know what using your hips feels like), but you can go even further. You can’t have too much hip mobility.

**Soft Tissue Work**

Next, get your hands on a foam roller and a tennis ball, baseball, golf ball, or a lacrosse ball. You’re going to do some soft tissue work to loosen up the muscles that are keeping your hips tight. Unless you’ve got a live in masseuse, these are essential items for any active person anyway, and they’re cheap, so there’s no excuse not to have them. Do these after a workout, in the morning, or, if you’re super tight and in a ton of pain, every day.

**Foam Roll Your IT Band** *(VIDEO)*

Tight hips often correlate with tight iliotibial bands, those infamous strips of connective tissue that run along the outside of our upper thighs. Start at your hip and roll down to just above your knee, pausing on any painful spots. Try slightly different angles to hit different aspects of the band. Fifteen rolls per leg.

**Foam Roll Your Hip Adductors (Inner Thighs)** *(VIDEO)*

You’ll sort of have to straddle the end of the roller to get your legs in position. It may look a bit obscene, but that’s okay. Fifteen rolls per leg.

**Foam Roll Your Hamstring** *(VIDEO)*

If you desire a bit more pressure, do one leg at a time while keeping the off leg in the air.

**Piriformis Myofascial Release** *(VIDEO)*

Follow the directions in the video. Targeting the piriformis can be tricky, and this is the most reliable method I’ve found.

(Note: this isn’t really hip mobility, but it’s related, and I recall a commenter asking for help with piriformis pain. Try [this](##).)
Otherwise, just generally foam roll the entire area – quads, hamstrings – and look for really tight spots which you can target with the ball.

**Mobility Drills**

These are classic mobility drills, essentially designed to explore the full range of motion in the hips. When you’re working these drills, think about starting out small. Instead of big circles right away, make *controlled* circles. Just make sure you’re actively using your hips in a controlled manner.

**Front-Back Leg Swings (VIDEO)**

Keeping your leg straight, hold on to a stable surface and swing your leg from front to back. Generate the power from your hips – from where the leg meets the hip socket – rather than from your thighs. To ensure hip engagement, keep your lumbar spine tight and still. If you find your lower back moving with each swing, swing a little shorter. Fifteen each leg.

**Side-to-Side Leg Swings (VIDEO)**

Similar to front-back leg swings, only performed from side to side. The urge to rotate your torso will be even greater with these, so be firm and lead with the hips, not the pelvis. Fifteen each leg.

**Squat Stands (VIDEO)**

Take a rather wide stance, touch your toes while keeping your legs straight, drop into a low squat position (elbows on the inside of your knees, knees shoved out and tracking over your toes) with a strong lumbar curve, throw your hands overhead, and come up. Make sure you maintain that lumbar curve and never round your back, because a rounded back means tension is taken off your hips. Repeat ten times.

**Fire Hydrants (VIDEO).**

On your hands and knees, make big (big – the video doesn’t really convey the range of motion) circles in the air with your knee by rotating at the hip. Do ten in each direction for each leg. These can be performed while walking upright (VIDEO), walking backward, (VIDEO) and briskly in reverse (VIDEO).

**Reverse Lunge with Twist (VIDEO)**

Take a big step backward (as far as you can). Drop to one knee and rotate your torso to the opposite side. Ten, each leg.

**Mountain Climbers**
Instead of going quickly and turning it into a workout, try to get your feet flat-footed on the ground, outside of your hands – and hold that position for a second or two before switching feet. Really feel the stretch. Make sure you maintain torso and hip position; don’t go flailing around with your whole body. See the third exercise in this video for an example (also shows fire hydrants, as well as some other great hip mobility stuff). Do ten of these for each leg.

**Hip Thrusts**

Sit on the ground, with your upper back resting on a bench, your feet on the floor and your knees up. Plant your feet firmly and thrust your hips forward by squeezing your glutes, creating a sort of bridge with your torso. Kinda like this, only without the absurd amount of weight. Light to no weight is also effective.

Hip mobility is nothing new. Trainers are increasingly aware of its importance, and there are some fantastic programs out there. Joe DeFranco’s “Agile Eight” hip mobility warm-up is a notable – and extremely effective – example. Consisting of eight basic drills, the Agile Eight hits all the basics of hip mobility. It’s perfect for maintenance, and it’s designed for daily use by experienced to semi-experienced athletes (or weekend warriors). It takes about seven or eight minutes to complete, perfect for the guy or gal who wants to stay mobile without turning it into a workout in and of itself. StrongLifts has another great dynamic stretch system for hip mobility that’s worth checking out.