

Lower Body Booster (Summer Shape-Up Week 4)

By Lisa Schilling RN

The lower body is often a target zone for improvement. Legs are worked regularly when walking and moving. The thighs or quadriceps and hamstrings, make up your largest muscle area. There are many exercises that target the legs. Mixing up your exercises will prevent boredom and keep your workouts fresh. Utilize exercises that only use your body for resistance to take your leg workouts anywhere. Working the legs from all angles is important. Most exercises also engage the gluteal muscles (your backside) and your hips. Maintaining range of motion in your joints will help prevent or reduce pain and stiffness, along with the chance for injury. When doing lower body work, always remember to do at least five minutes of warm-up and to stretch when done. This important step will promote greater range and can reduce injury.

Choose a variety of exercises to target multiple areas. This will allow you to maintain balance and symmetry. Improved coordination and balance can be seen as you increase tone and strength in your lower body. Strong legs will propel you faster and increase coordination. Due to the large surface area, building these lean muscles will really burn calories!

Squats are a classic lower body exercise. Often people shy away from this basic exercise due to knee pain. It is important to note that your knees should **never** extend beyond your ankles. Often poor form or an inattention to this rule will be the cause of knee pain during squats. Traditional squats begin with you standing in an open stance with feet shoulder width apart. You then bend your knees as if sitting in a chair. Your buttocks will extend out and your back will be angled and flat. Again—note that knees never extend beyond your toes. Slowly rise back to standing using the legs and tightening the buttocks.

A simplified variation is called **Sit and Taps**. You stand in front of a chair, sit

down briefly and then immediately stand back up by squeezing the buttocks and using the larger thigh muscles. This takes less precision and still targets the large muscle groups in the legs.

Plies are another good lower body toner. Often we think of this as a ballet move. Keep that in mind so that you maintain good posture with shoulders back and abdominals tight. Think about lifting the rib cage up and out of the abdominal area. Try that right now—see what I mean? Feels better doesn't it? All exercise should be done with good posture for best results. Plies are done in a wide stance. You will lower the body by bowing knees out to the side—knees never extending beyond the ankles. Pause in the lowered position and stand back up by squeezing the buttocks and using the larger thigh muscles. For added benefit you can rise up onto your toes when returning to the standing position. Squeeze calves and then lower your heel back to the starting position. This **calve raise** will add a multifunctional dimension to the exercise.

Another basic exercise is the **Lunge**. Stand with a step in front of you if possible. Step out putting your whole right foot firmly on the step. Bend left knee to about step level, thus lowering the body. If that is too much for you at your current fitness level, you can do a much smaller lunge. You will still benefit from the exercise. From the lunge position, return to standing by using the large muscles of the legs. To add more function you can add arm movements (with or without dumbbells) to do bicep curls or overhead presses. The more arm work done, the more advanced the move. Master the lunge before adding arms. This is more advanced and will save time by targeting two muscle groups at once. Consider adding a few walking lunges to your usual walk. This can add difficulty and increase toning.

Basic **core floor exercises** like the outer and inner leg raise are always good along with “knees and elbows position” exercises—that kick the leg up and out. These and other traditional floor exercises have been done for a reason— they work!