

HEALTHY SLEEPING HABITS

How To Use a Tennis Ball To Relieve Back Pain and Help You Sleep, According to a Massage Therapist



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If you've ever had muscle tension or a nagging pain in your back, you know the struggle of falling asleep at night is real. Perhaps you're constantly tossing and turning and can't seem to find a position that relieves the discomfort. Shiloh Pileggi, the lead massage therapist and educator at the Spa at Mohonk Mountain House in upstate New York says these types of muscle pains are often caused by micro trauma to the muscle belly from repetitive motions throughout the day, overexertion of muscles when exercising, poor posture, or poor quality of sleep. Whatever the case may be, there's a handy tool that may provide some relief and help you get some sleep at night: a tennis ball.

According to Pileggi, using a tennis ball to put gentle pressure on the area helps lengthen and stretch the muscles, which can ease discomfort while distracting your brain from the pain. She advises skipping this technique if the soreness is from trauma to the muscles, such as if you've been in a car accident. "There is muscle damage with trauma, and the body needs time to heal," she says. "There may also be damage to the skeletal system, nervous system, or vascular system, and that needs to be evaluated before doing any at-home self-help techniques." But if you're dealing with regular ol' back tension and achiness, this tennis ball trick can help make it easier to fall asleep at night.

How to use a tennis ball to help you sleep

Lay down and place a small ball under the spot that is bothering you. Pileggi says a tennis ball is ideal, but you can also use any small rubber ball or even a racquetball. It's important that you do this lying down at on a bed without a pillow under your head. If you prefer to do this technique on a yoga mat, she recommends using a softer ball. "The harder the surface that you're lying on, the less the ball will sink into it," she says.

Proper placement of the ball is also important. For lower back pain, Pileggi suggests putting two tennis balls in a sock and placing one on either side of the spine. Whatever you do, don't place the ball directly under the spine or other bones. Not only will that not feel good, but she says bony protrusions don't have a lot of tissue over them, so these areas can bruise easily.

Stay in this position for two to five minutes, max. Pileggi adds that you can also use this technique for pains in other large muscle groups, such as the glutes and hamstrings, that aren't relaxing on their own due to over-exercising or poor posture. Plus, tennis balls are also great tools for stretching, relieving neck and shoulder tension, and to massage out painful knots and muscle aches while traveling.

Precautions to be aware of

Do not fall asleep with the ball underneath you. Pileggi says that it can potentially bruise the muscle or cause it to tighten up to protect itself, leading to more discomfort than you started, which defeats the purpose. If you don't feel any relief within the first five minutes of trying this technique, Pileggi says it may not be the best solution for you as there are other reasons that can cause a muscle to tighten and cause discomfort. If the pain increases at any point, stop and don't continue using this technique.

In these cases, she recommends stretching or applying heat or ice to the area to help relieve the discomfort. "You are the expert on your own body. It is important to know what works for you," she says. "If taking a warm bath or using a hot pack gives you relief from muscle aches, then use it. If you know stretches that help, use them. If not, take a class with a qualified instructor so you do not cause more discomfort than you are already in." And if the pain persists and begins to impact your quality of life, consult with a professional.

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