Dear Alice,

I like my body shape and size except for one thing -- my legs are too skinny. Are there any exercises I can do to make them look shapelier?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Sure! Lots of sports and activities help to strengthen and tone legs. Some of these include running, swimming, cycling, blading, ice skating, skiing, and jumping rope, just to name a few.

Specific resistance exercises can help strengthen and shape specific muscles in the leg. You may wish to begin by doing exercises that use your own body weight and require no special equipment. Here are a few:

**Lunge:** This exercise works the quadriceps (muscle of the front upper thigh).

1. Stand with your feet together, keeping your head up and looking straight ahead.
2. Take a long step forward with one foot, making sure this leg is at a right angle (don't let your knee bend in front of your toes), and bend the knee of your back leg until it's as close to the floor as possible.
3. Hold this position for a second or two and then slowly push back to a standing position.
4. Repeat with the alternate leg going forward.
5. Be sure that your movements are slow and controlled.
6. Build up your repetitions over time.
7. To increase resistance, you may hold hand weights alongside your body.

**Heel raise:** This exercise works your calf muscle (official term: gastrocnemius).

1. Stand with the balls of your feet on a step -- hold onto a wall or handrail for balance.
2. Slowly rise up on your toes, pause for a second or two, and then decline.
3. Progress slowly -- don't overdo it at first.
4. Increase repetitions as you become stronger.

**Toe raise:** This exercise for your shin is particularly useful if you are a runner.

1. Sit on a stool, bench, or chair with feet flat on the floor.
2. Raise your toes toward the ceiling while keeping your heels on the floor.
3. Hold this position for a second or two and then slowly lower your toes.
4. Increase repetitions as you become stronger.

**Squat:** This works the hamstrings, located in the back of your upper thighs. This exercise is difficult for beginners. It is best to do this in front of a mirror to check your form.

1. Position your feet shoulder width apart, with your hands on your hips or the front of your thighs.
2. Slowly lower your body until you're in a "sitting" position. Your front thighs should be parallel with the floor. You may also feel muscle contraction in your rear end (you're working these muscles as well!).
3. Hold this position for a second or two and then slowly stand up straight.
4. Increase repetitions as you become stronger.
5. With increasing strength, you may also wish to add resistance by using a barbell, held behind your neck, that's resting on your upper back.

**Lying side lift:** To work the outside muscle of your leg called the abductors:

1. Lying on your side, slowly lift your top leg as high as you can while keeping it straight, and then gradually lower it.
2. Repeat as many times as comfortable.
3. Lie on your opposite side to work the other leg in the same manner.

To work the inner thigh muscle (adductor):

1. Lie on your side, crossing and slightly bending your top leg over your bottom one. Be sure not to let your hips roll back -- stay exactly on your side.
2. Slowly lift your bottom leg as high as you can and then lower it gradually.
3. Do this as many times as possible (without extreme pain).
4. Repeat with your other leg.
5. Some people like to use ankle weights for these exercises as they become stronger.

If you have access to a gym, you may wish to use machines to accomplish the same exercises. Particularly useful ones are the leg extension (for quadriceps) and leg curl (for hamstrings). A seated leg press is also beneficial for quads and gluteal muscles. If you use weights, don't increase the load too quickly because you may injure joints and connective tissue. Consult with a personal trainer to determine proper starting weights, correct form, and seat height before using any gym equipment.

Be sure to allow at least a day or two between weight training sessions that focus on/use the same muscle (i.e., don't work out your legs two days in a row).

If these tips are followed, and you stick with it, you are sure to be on your way to stronger, shapelier legs!

Alice!

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