How can I develop muscle symmetry? [1]

Dear Alice,

My right leg is more developed than my left leg. My right leg is one inch bigger in circumference. How do I go about developing the muscles in my left leg so that they are symmetrical?

Thanks so much.

Answer

Dear Reader,

It's actually quite typical for one leg to have a larger circumference than the other. In fact, many people find this to be the case with other body parts, as well, such as with biceps, triceps, forearms, and calves. Even feet are often half-a-size different from one another. Is there anything wrong with that? Absolutely not — bodies come in all shapes, sizes, and symmetries! That being said, certain exercises may help develop the muscles in the leg that is notably smaller. Read on for more information and some risks to keep in mind throughout the process.

It’s worth first distinguishing between muscle asymmetry and muscle imbalance. Some resources refer to them interchangeably, but in fact, they are two seemingly similar but different phenomena. While muscle asymmetry refers to visual differences (what you have described), muscle imbalance occurs when muscles on one side of a joint become too tight from overuse, causing muscles on the other side to weaken. This may result from day-to-day activities, as well as from physical activity. Muscle imbalance affects the position of the joint and changes its path of motion during movement, potentially causing injury. Interestingly, treating muscle asymmetry by exercising the smaller appendage — something that is often recommended and will be discussed in more detail — can actually put you at risk of developing muscle imbalance. In order to avoid its development, it’s recommended that you vary your movements throughout the day, and even in physical activity (by not repetitively performing the same exact exercise in every workout). The American Council of Exercise [2] recommends being conscious of overusing the body's dominant side and experimenting with using the opposing side for day-to-day activities such as picking up groceries. A health care provider or a fitness professional can be your go-to for more information on manipulating muscle mass.
With this mind, there are, indeed, ways of making your legs more similar in size. In order for the left leg to catch up in size and circumference with the right, you'll want to build muscle mass (achieve hypertrophy) through targeted training and exercising of the left leg. You may consider practicing strength training, which can include lifting weights and doing leg lifts on the leg that is smaller in size. The takeaway here is to focus your efforts on exercising the leg you want to be larger. At the same time, overused muscles can become tight, inflamed, and irritated, so be mindful of how your leg responds to the exercise(s) you choose. And, don’t forget to work the right leg as well — not doing so can increase the risk of muscle loss, loss of strength or flexibility, and the development of muscle imbalance.

While you can do these exercises on your own, you may consider consulting or working with a personal trainer to get a workout tailored to your needs. They can help monitor your goals and progress, and they can also help ensure that you keep your muscles balanced while trying to change the size of the smaller leg. Keep in mind though, even in doing the exercises provided, your leg's circumference won't increase dramatically overnight, or even over the course of a week. As with any training or workout regimen, with time, hard work, and determination, you can move toward equalizing the circumference of your legs. However, before jumping into a new routine, you may find it helpful to reflect on what your body can currently do for you, regardless of the symmetry or size of your legs. After all, asymmetry of all sorts of body parts is incredibly common, and you certainly aren't alone in having one leg a different size than the other. Best of luck in achieving balance in your legs, your workout routines, and your life!

Alice!

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