

Training Turnout – Part 2 – Isolating Your True Turnout

So now that we have a little more turnout range...
How do we best work with it?

In [Part 1](#) of this [Training Turnout](#) Series, we looked at ways of opening out the hips, to get some more turnout range, and discussed some reasons why your hips might be getting tight in the first place. If you missed this article, make sure to check out the article and [download the PDF here](#).

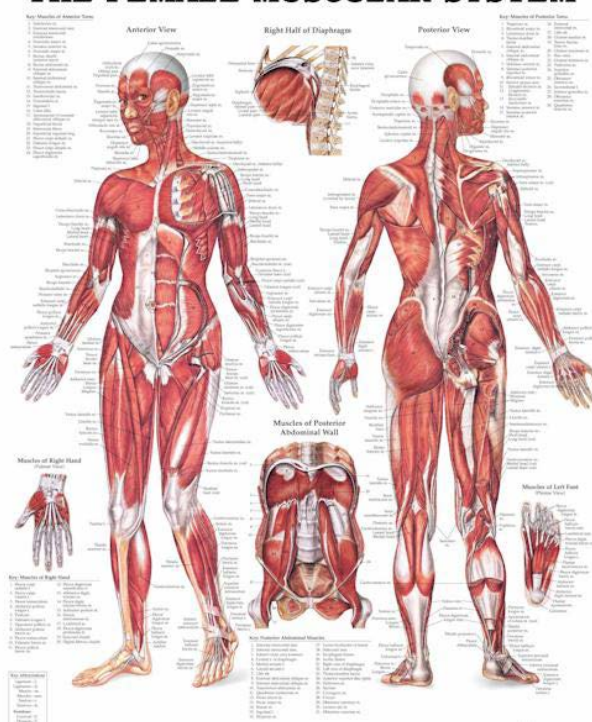
Once you have developed a little more range, it is essential to understand exactly how to train your turnout muscles safely. Far too many dancers do exercises to “improve their turnout” that may actually be damaging for their hips.

One of the most surprising things for us in the clinic is how few dancers actually know where their turnout muscles are! I always ask students to point out where their turnout muscles are both on their own body, and on a muscle chart like the one below... And we always get a few surprising answers!



- Without looking at any of the labels – point to the area where you think your turnout muscles are...
- Then think about where on your body this would be...
- What other muscles do you think help with turnout?
- What muscles should not be used? Why?

THE FEMALE MUSCULAR SYSTEM



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Where are your Turnout Muscles?

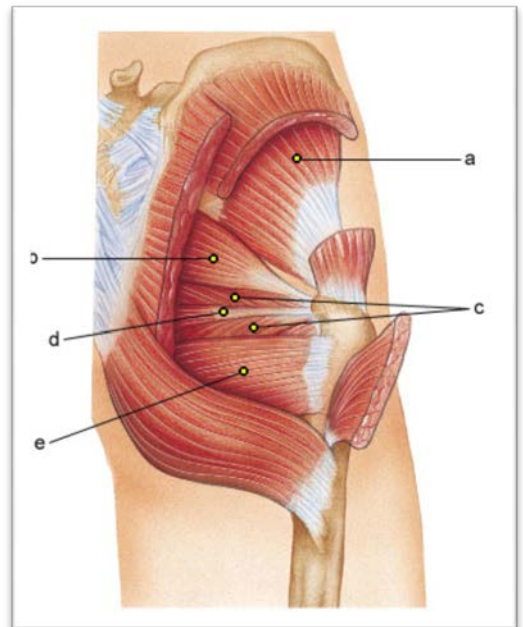
Your main turnout muscles are called your *Deep External Rotators* and they are deep underneath your gluteal muscles, **HERE...**

On this picture the big gluteal muscles (*Gluteus Maximus and Gluteus Medius*) have been cut away so that you can see the deep rotators.

There are actually 6 Deep External Rotators which are shown in the image to the right. Gluteus Minimus (a) is not classed as one of the deep rotators, but does help stabilize the hip, and actually assists in turning the leg in!

- a. (Gluteus Minimus - Internal rotator)
- b. Piriformis
- c. Gemelli (Superior & Inferior)
- d. Obturator Internus
- e. Quadratus Femoris
- f. Obturator Externus (Not indicated in image)

Each of them works in a slightly different way, and in a different range. For example, your *Quadratus Femoris* is very much used in controlling turnout on your standing leg, whereas your *Piriformis* works more en fondu. In the [Training Turnout](#) program we go into how to train each of these muscles in detail.



So... Where are these muscles on you?



Your turnout muscles sit around the back of your hip, under the line of your leotard, from the lumpy bone on the outside of your hip (*Greater Trochanter*) towards your tail bone (*Sacrum*). Your *Quadratus Femoris* goes from your *Greater Trochanter* to your sitting bone (*Ischial Tuberosity*).

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What other muscles do you think are involved in turnout?

Many people think that their bigger gluteal muscles, inner thighs or front of the hips are their turnout muscles. While the inner thighs do support turnout in some positions, they are not really 'turnout muscles'.

Your core muscles however are very important in creating a base to work your turnout from, and the muscles in your feet that help prevent from rolling can help stimulate a whole line of smaller muscles through your legs to stabilize more effectively in turnout.

Your deepest hip flexors (*Psoas Major*) are very important in helping to control the leg in turnout en l'air, and we will discuss this further in **Part 3** of this article.

Your *VMO* (Inner part of the Quadriceps Muscle) will help to control the alignment of the knee en fondu, but again is not really a turnout muscle.

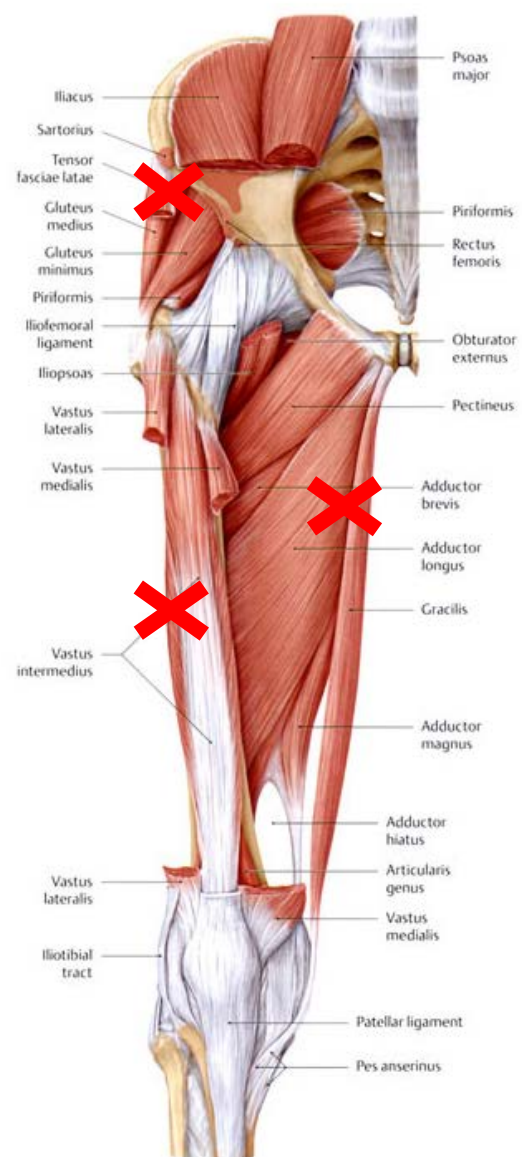
What muscles should not be used – and why?

If you grip with all of your gluteals to try and hold turnout (especially *Gluteus Maximus* and *Gluteus Medius*) you will tend to develop a lot of tension in the gluteal area. This can restrict your flexibility into turnout and also into the splits.

Your gluteal muscles are important to help you jump, so if they are already being used for turnout, then they either won't be available to be used for jumping, or, if they let go of their job to turn out, then you will struggle to control your turnout in allegro. In addition, if you use your gluteal muscles or your hip flexors to help with turnout you may actually develop tension in these muscles that will **REDUCE** your turnout over time!

If you use the front of the hips to work your turnout, the *TFL* and *Rectus Femoris* will get very tight, and may become sore and inflamed. This is often felt with pain in the front of the hips with retire, or if you notice that the hips are very tight when going into a plie.

Also try not to grip with the outside of the lower legs when attempting to get more turnout. This puts a lot of strain on the ankle and knee, and can lead to all kinds of other issues!

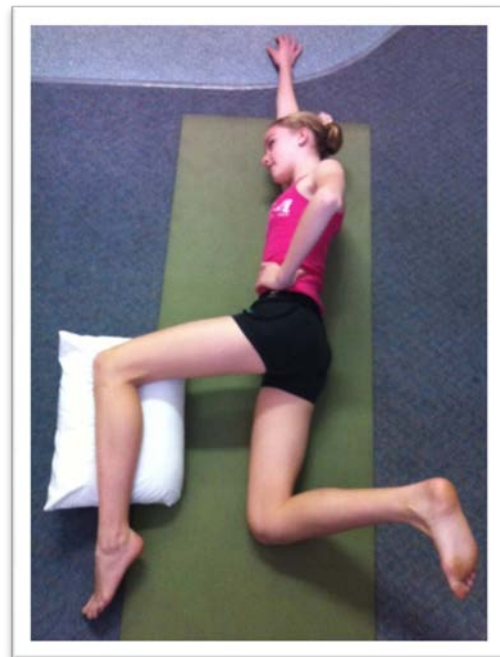


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So how do we train our turnout properly?

Many people struggle to control turnout on their standing leg. This exercise is wonderful for not only finding your standing leg turnout muscles, but also helps in freeing up the range in this position. This exercise was developed to avoid all of the 'cheating' that goes on with other turnout exercises and has turned into one of our favourites!

- Lie on your side with the underneath arm stretched out under your head
- Keep your hips square, and keep your hand on your hip to check that it doesn't move
- Place the knee and shin of your top leg on a pillow, supported at 90 degrees of hip flexion
- Make sure that the thigh of the underneath leg is in a straight line with the rest of your body, and the knee is bent
- Activate your deep tummy and back muscles, stabilising your spine in neutral



- Slowly lift the heel of the underneath leg towards the ceiling
- Focus on rotating the thigh bone in the socket
- Keep the knee of the underneath leg in line with the rest of the body (it will usually want to creep forwards)
- Lift the heel as high as you can, without moving anything else, then slowly lower back to the floor
- Repeat between 10 – 20 times depending on your current strength

Training Tip: After doing one side, come into standing and place the feet in first position. Try to rotate your thigh bone using the deep muscles that you felt working in the exercise. Note whether it is easier on the leg that you have just worked, Then try going into a plie, grand plie and a rise, maintaining your turnout from the hip...

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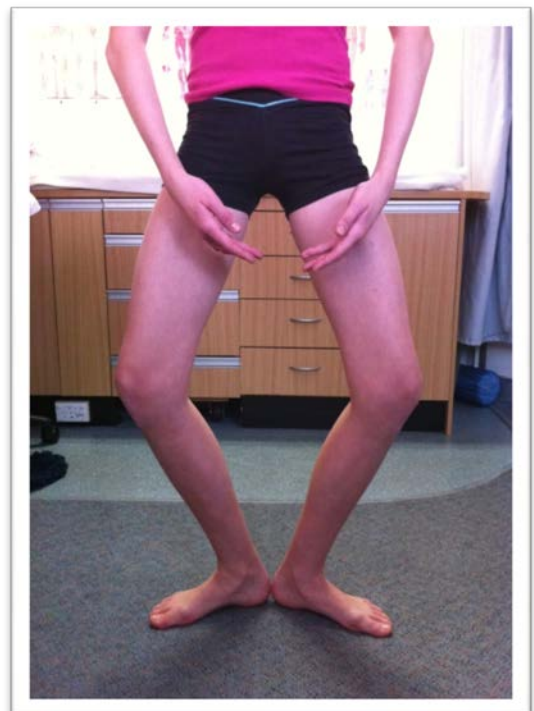
Turnout Control in Standing

Once you have found your deep turnout muscles, it is a good idea to start to learn how to use them as you would in class. It is important not to grip the gluteals to achieve or maintain your range of turnout, but to isolate it from the top of the leg. For many more exercises designed to isolate your turnout in different ranges, please use the [Training Turnout book](#).

- Begin by standing in parallel, then rock your weight back onto your heels
- Rotate the thigh bones, focussing on a deep rotation in the hip socket – using the muscles you worked in the first exercise - to take the feet into first position
- Place the front of your foot down in this position (*Tripod Foot Position*)
- Make sure not to wiggle to get the feet out further!
- Prepare for a rise – by pressing the balls of the feet slightly into the floor – but still keep the skin of the heel touching the floor
- Use the tips of your fingers to check that the *Gluteus Medius* and *Gluteus Maximus* muscles are relaxed, while the *Deep External Rotators* are gently working to control the rotation.



- Next, practice a demi pli  with isolated rotation
- Lengthen the spine, imagining that you are growing 2 cm taller
- Slowly sink into a demi pli  – staying relaxed through the front of the hips
- Again, check with your fingers that the *Gluteus Medius* is not gripping on too hard (a gentle tension is ok – constant gripping is not!)
- Make sure that there is an even fold in both hips and both knees (a lot of dancers have an uneven pli  – simply through habit)
- Come into standing, maintaining rotation from the hip



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Turnout Exercise in Retiré Position

This is a fantastic way to find your turnout muscles while keeping the gluteals relaxed. Make sure you keep your tummy muscles on, and that your back and hips stay still. If you have very tight hips or any pain in the hips, you may need to place a pillow under your pelvis for this exercise.



1. Lie on your stomach with your legs in parallel. Bend one knee to 90° and take it out to the side slightly. Loop a resistance band around your ankle, and have the other end around a table leg or a friend's knee. Make sure that the resistance band is placed at an angle of 90° to your thigh bone.
2. Keep your hips in line (no hitching) and both hip bones on the floor. Have one hand under your forehead and the other under your hip to check for lifting of the hip.
3. Slowly bring the lifted foot towards the leg on the ground, as though you are going into a retiré position, against the resistance of the band. Focus on rotating the thigh bone in the socket *using as little muscular effort as possible*.
4. Pause, then slowly release the leg slowly bringing it back to the starting position. Repeat ten times on one leg, then repeat on the other side. Complete two sets of ten on each leg.
5. Make sure you are using your deep turnout muscles and not gripping with your outer bottom muscles. Remember to release SLOWLY, so that you are working the muscles on the way up as well as the way down.
6. Test for over-activation of the *Gluteus Medius* and *Gluteus Maximus* by feeling for tension in the muscles along the top of the pelvis. The deep rotators are very deep and very small, so you may not actually feel them working strongly, however, if you are relaxing the outer gluteals, and still rotating the thigh bone in the hip socket, you are most probably using the right muscles!

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Turnout Control in a Tendu

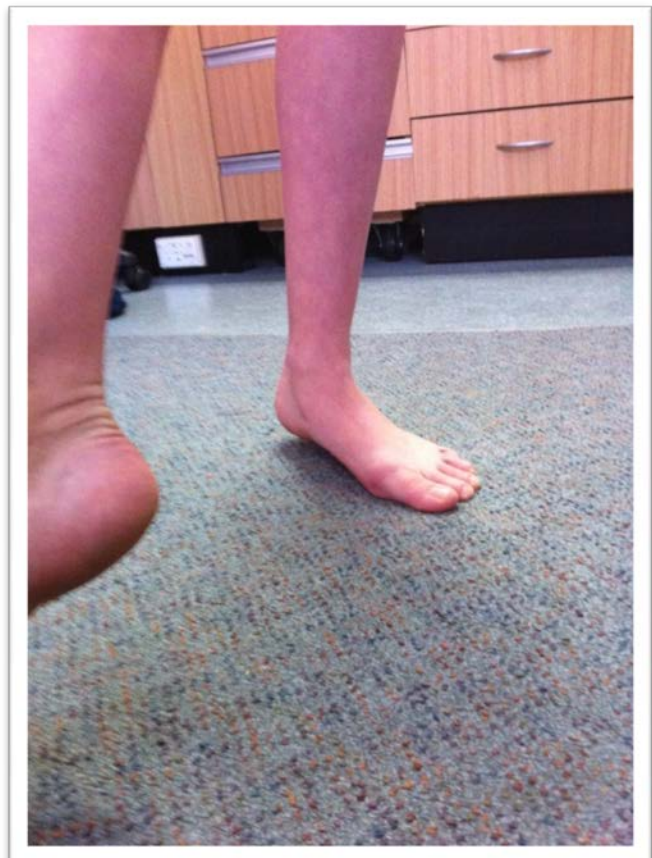
It is all fine and well working on your turnout in an exercise – however the real challenge is controlling turnout when you are dancing. Most people are focused on maintaining their turnout in their extensions (we will touch on that in Part 3 of this article) but the real secret is your standing leg. Far too many dancers focus on the working leg, yet you need a stable base to perform everything else off, so time spent on mastering the supporting leg is a very good investment!

One of the biggest challenges is to control the position of our foot, and maintain turnout when on a single leg. Many dancers force their turnout when on two feet, and then let the heel slip out when going onto a single leg.

This exercise can be very frustrating and a little demoralising when you first start it, but you will reap the rewards if you stick with it – I promise!

- Start in 5th position. Hands can be on your hips, in 1st position or 5th position (5th is the hardest!)
- Take care to have your feet in the 'Tripod Foot' Position
- Press slightly into the balls of the feet as if to go into a rise, yet keep the skin of your heel touching the floor
- Focus on rotating the thigh bones in the sockets using the deep rotators and inner thighs

- Slowly release the front foot into a tendu devant
- Try and maintain the turnout of the supporting foot in the position it was in when in 5th position
- While the front foot is in degage, do a mini rise on the supporting foot to check your balance and weight placement , before lowering the heel
- Slowly return the working leg to 5th position, working the turnout of both legs
- Repeat 3 times to the front, 3 to second and 3 derrière before repeating on the other side.



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A Word to the Wise...

The other question that constantly gets asked in regards to all of the exercises that I prescribe is *“When is the best time to do them?”*

These exercises really can be done at any time during the day, however, a really good time is to go through them before class. After a quick warm up, do some gentle mobility exercises and short stretches to open out the hips. Please remember not to do stretches longer than 30 seconds before class, as sustained stretches can actually prevent the muscles from being able to contract properly.

Once the hips are feeling looser, go through the exercises in this program to ‘wake up’ your turnout muscles. You do not need to do many of each, but just focusing on them, and activating them before class, will make them much easier to find and use in class.

One other point to remember is *not to try too hard* when training your turnout muscles. Most people who struggle with turnout think that if they squeeze their muscles harder their turnout will get stronger but this usually actually makes the hips tighter.

Turnout control is more about subtle coordination of the muscles around the hips, of using the most minimal amount of effort at just the right time.

Focus on increasing your awareness of your true turnout muscles and you will be amazed at how much your dancing improves!

I hope that you have enjoyed this article and hope that you soon feel the results of these exercises in your dancing.

Keep posted for Part 3 – Achieving the Ultimate Extensions

