

Sitting on a Ball Keeps Office Workers on a Roll

by Jack Williams

Picture an office teeming with workers who couldn't be more on the ball. Chests open, shoulders straight, trunk muscles offering plenty of anti-slouch support. Each is perched atop a round, inflatable plastic object, variously known as an exercise ball, stability ball or Swiss ball. Each is practicing the art of active sitting, turning a chairless workplace into a fitness-conscious ballroom. Chalk it up to the ingenuity of a sedentary society: a strategy to combat the hunched shoulders, concave chests and disengaged lower body of the chronically deskbound. Because of their unstable surface, these durable stability balls are forcing sedentary workers to activate underused muscles, to subtly shift their weight, to remain alert. Not that there's anything wrong with the ergonomically efficient chair. It's just that uneven surface of the balls offers an inviting alternative - especially if you add a few choreographed stretches and maneuvers to keep your buns on a roll. Few professionals in the fitness field have focused on the role of stability balls in a non-gym setting as intently as Canadians Jane Clapp and Sarah Robichaud. Their new book, "Working on the Ball: A Simple Guide to Office Fitness" (Andrews McMeel Publishing; \$9.95), is among many recent releases - including "Strength Training On the Ball" (Healing Arts Press; \$18) by Colleen Craig - that demonstrate how stability balls can be incorporated into a fitness program. "There are whole offices and schools outfitted with the balls in Europe, where they originated," Clapp said. "It's a growing trend to combat the effects of sitting. A lot of fitness professionals in North America are realizing how damaging sitting can be, causing lack of alertness, back pain, bad posture." Informal business settings, to be sure, are more receptive to the stability ball concept. "You see them in the film and TV industry, in design offices, in advertising firms - any place where people are health conscious," Clapp said. Slower to catch on are more traditional, white-collar work environments. In any case, there's a period of adjustment for someone accustomed to decades of slouching in a chair and hunching over a desk. "You absolutely have to sit up straight on a ball," Clapp said. "If you're very deconditioned, you need to work your way up to a full day of active sitting, and anyone with injuries should talk to their doctor about medical concerns." Robichaud suggests using the ball for progressively longer intervals, stopping when you feel fatigued. Yes, fatigued from sitting. "After about two months of being committed to sitting on the ball, you feel really strong," she said. "My clients feel energized." By sitting on the ball, you activate trunk or core muscles. By contrast, slumping in a chair, or passive sitting in general, sends no message to the muscles. "We promote active sitting at any time," Robichaud said. "If your choice is an upright chair or a ball, stick with the ball. Time is a major issue here. People don't have time to go to a gym. There's less time to be active. So if you can fit in another hour of active sitting, go for it." Detractors argue that in activating trunk musculature on a ball, you are compressing the intervertebral discs. "Prolonged compression is contraindicated, especially during sitting since the pelvis is rotated forward," writes Jeff Pajot in the Ergoweb Forum, an ergonomics Web site. Whether you're using a ball at the workplace or using it as a support for stretching or strength training, one thing is incontrovertible: You better buy a good ball. "The less shiny ones the better," Clapp said. "You want an antiburst ball, one that won't puncture. You can get a good one anywhere from \$20 to \$40, and the highest end is about \$80." Sitting on a stability ball can be a component of subtle changes throughout the day that can make up for lost time in the gym. Use the stairs instead of the elevator, for example. Park further away from the entrance. Take the long way to the restroom. "We want to help people realize that the office can be a physically active place without detracting from the task at hand," Clapp said.

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