

Stretch and Release on the Ball

By Shirley Archer

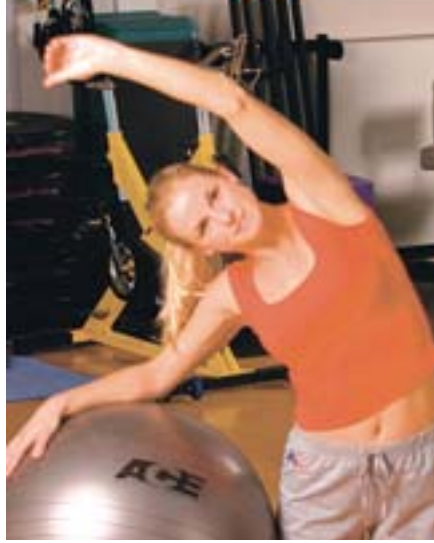
Over the past few years, many fitness professionals have become sold on the benefits of using a stability ball for exercises that improve muscular strength and endurance, particularly for core conditioning. Although its potential for improving flexibility has not been explored as thoroughly, the stability ball is a valuable and effective tool for stretching and mobility exercises. Using a stability ball for stretches also adds variety and fun to any workout routine.

To take full advantage of the unique qualities of the ball and maximize its value, learn the benefits of working on the ball and instructional tips for easily guiding your clients through various exercises. As fitness professionals, our clients continue to challenge us with their needs to overcome various aches and pains and enjoy a better quality of life. Use these ideas for training on the ball to add depth and breadth to your teaching repertoire so that you can make each workout session fit your clients' individual needs.

Benefits of Flexibility and Mobility Training on the Ball

The soft, round shape of the stability ball makes it ideal for flexibility and mobil-

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ity training. Older adults and larger-sized clients who may not be as agile getting up and down from the floor, or who are not comfortable sitting or lying on the floor's hard surface, can use the ball to perform stretches comfortably in a seated, side-lying, prone or supine position. The roundness of the ball also facilitates the release of muscular tension and tightness because lying on the ball in various positions allows the spine to decompress and spinal muscles to relax.

Another benefit of using the stability ball as a training tool is that it is extremely versatile and can accommodate the needs of beginning exercisers to elite athletes. All clients can perform passive, active and dynamic stretches. For beginning exercisers or people with special conditions, the ball can provide support to enhance mobility, and make stretching easier for people who experience discomfort bearing weight in particular joints. For example, a client who cannot perform a quadruped cat stretch on the floor due to pain in the wrists, can instead kneel in front of the ball, place their hands on the ball instead of the floor, and roll the ball back and forth to enjoy a back stretch.

For more advanced exercisers, the ball can provide challenges to increase intensity and simultaneously train flexibility, balance, coordination and strength. For example, a stronger client can perform a deep hip stretch by sitting on the ball and placing the ankle on the opposite thigh (rather than doing a hip stretch by lying supine on the ground). In this manner, the client can challenge his or her balance while simultaneously enjoying a stretch. More flexible clients can also hold the ball as a prop to add additional weight to intensify certain passive stretches.

Exercises on pages 10 & 11

INSTRUCTIONAL TIPS

Cautious is of the utmost importance when using the stability ball because its inherently unstable surface means the risk of accident or injury is always present. In most cases, a common sense approach is best. Closely supervise and spot your clients whenever you are working with the ball. Make sure that you are in an open space, away from any potential hazards, in case of a fall. The environment can be made even safer by using burst-resistant balls, which reduce the risk of injury since they deflate slowly, rather than collapse quickly, if punctured.

Make sure that your client is able to handle the stabilization demands of any exercise. At no time should any exercise cause pain or pose a high risk of falling. If a client is unable to execute an exercise with good form, then it is too advanced. Find appropriate modifications so that your client experiences a sense of challenge without struggle.

When it comes to improving flexibility and mobility, further research is necessary to more fully explore the best techniques for, and optimal frequency of, training. Based on current research evidence, the American College of Sports Medicines recommends the following guidelines for flexibility training:

- ▶ Incorporate exercises that stretch all major muscle and tendon groups.
- ▶ Use static, ballistic or modified PNF (proprioceptive neuromuscular facilitation) techniques as appropriate.
- ▶ Hold stretches for 10 to 30 seconds for static stretching; a six-second contraction followed by a 10- to 30-second assisted stretch for PNF.
- ▶ Perform at least four repetitions per muscle group.
- ▶ Stretch a minimum of two to three days a week.

For good stretching technique, keep in mind the following tips:

- ▶ Move slowly to a point of moderate tension and hold stretches for 10 to 30 seconds. For optimal results, perform multiple repetitions. For example, two stretches held for 30 seconds each are preferred to one stretch held for 60 seconds.
- ▶ Feel the stretch in the muscle, not in the joints.
- ▶ Breathe deeply and continuously; avoid breath holding.
- ▶ Release tension throughout your body while focusing on a particular muscle. For example, avoid clenching your jaw or hunching your shoulders as you perform stretches.