

Chapter 8

Walking Tall: Chest, Abdominals, and Lower Back

In This Chapter

- ▶ Discovering the best abdominal exercises to strengthen your core
 - ▶ Developing great chest and pectoral muscles
 - ▶ Ball exercises that work the lower back
 - ▶ Using ball exercises to develop a longer spine
 - ▶ Creating perfect posture using ball exercises
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The *core* is a virtual powerhouse of strength located in the midsection of your body. Basically, your core includes everything between your ribs and your hips. In this chapter, I combine the best abdominal, chest, and lower back exercises to work your entire core.

I would say that the “no pain, no gain” expression applies best to this chapter. When you do the following exercises, I’m sure you’ll discover strength that you never knew you had.

To get in the right frame of mind and to prepare your muscles and joints for the following exercises, try the warm-up in Chapter 5. Not only does it encourage circulation to your heart and lungs, but it also reduces the risk of injury.



Like with any new exercise program, consult your doctor before beginning. Never attempt any exercise that you’re not sure of or that causes you pain in any way.

Man from horse!

If you visualize yourself with an invisible cord running from your chest up to the sky or a tree, you'll know why I call this section "Man from horse!" My dance teacher made this reference over and over in ballet class, and after I saw the movie starring Richard Harris, I got it. In case you haven't seen the movie, it features Richard Harris's character being strung up by his chest bone, or sternum, to a tree. Ouch! Of course my dance teacher referenced the movie because we were all slouching, and she was trying to make a point — the importance of good posture.

Slouching is a habit that's easy to fall into without even noticing. When I'm working at the computer, I always find myself slouching. Just recently I broke myself of this habit by replacing my chair with an exercise ball. It's amazing

how sitting on something like a ball improves your posture within seconds! Sitting on the ball instead of a chair forces you to use the stabilizer muscles of the body and helps you develop strong balance. Sitting on the ball also makes you contract your abdominal muscles to steady yourself — it's an added benefit.

To replace your chair at work or at home with the ball, first make sure that the ball gives you the desired height and firmness you need. The desired height is when your thighs are parallel to the floor. The desired firmness is when the ball isn't too filled with air but has a slight give to it when you sit on it. In other words, when your butt makes a small indentation on the ball when you sit on it.

Lengthening Your Spine

As you move throughout the day, you use the muscles along your spine called the *multifidus muscles*. Bending down, picking things up, and twisting are all activities that use these muscles to protect the spinal cord. If you forget to strengthen the spine and back muscles, all your other activities suffer and your body weakens.

Many chiropractors and doctors use the lower back exercises in this chapter to keep the spine long and flexible. When you're in the *prone position* (lying face down) on the ball, you use all your muscles to support your body and to help build a stronger lower back.

After you complete the lower back exercises, I suggest trying the *back stretch* that I include in Chapter 14 or simply lying over the ball to stretch out your spine. My 3-year-old loves doing that exercise, and I hope you do, too!

Chest Workout

Many of the exercises in this section use your own body weight to build and strengthen the pecs, delts, and lats — otherwise known as the chest, shoulder, and upper back muscles.

The wall push-ups and floor push-ups both work the muscles in front of the chest, whereas the flies and lat pullovers concentrate on the muscles along the sides and the back of the body. In combination, the following exercises make for a complete and challenging workout.

Floor push-ups with the ball

Floor push-ups on the ball target your chest muscles along with your abdominal muscles and butt to keep you steady on the ball.



Keeping your lower legs or shins on the ball helps you balance yourself during the push-up.

To do this exercise, follow these steps:

1. **Lie with your belly on the ball and walk your hands forward until the ball rests under your legs (as Figure 8-1a).**

Make sure that you keep your hands directly below your shoulders.

2. **Lower your upper body toward the floor, bending the elbows out to the sides (see Figure 8-1b).**



Figure 8-1:
Push-ups.

3. **Straighten your elbows and exhale as you press back up into starting position.**



Complete ten repetitions.

A couple of do's and don'ts for this exercise:

- ✓ *Do* keep your abdominal muscles tight to help you maintain your balance.
- ✓ *Do* use proper breathing, inhaling as you slowly lower your body down and exhaling as you press your body back up.
- ✓ *Don't* arch your back. Keep it straight and in line with your head and the rest of your body.

Chest press with bridge

The chest press with a bridge combines two great exercises — the bridge and the chest press — to work the pectoral, hips, and butt muscles.



Keep your hips pressed up toward the ceiling during this exercise. Any sagging or arching in your lower back can place strain on your back muscles.

To do this exercise, follow these steps:

1. **Rest your upper back on the ball with your knees bent at a 90-degree angle.**
Make sure that your knees are stacked over your ankles.
2. **Holding a weight in each hand, extend your arms toward the ceiling, placing the weights directly above your chest (as Figure 8-2 shows).**
Your palms will face forward as you press your weights up.
3. **Lower your weights back down by bending your elbows back in toward your body.**



Complete two sets of 10 to 15 repetitions.

A couple of do's and don'ts for this exercise:

- ✓ *Do* slowly press the weights up above your head feeling your chest muscles contract.
- ✓ *Don't* forget to tighten your abdominal muscles to support your back.



Figure 8-2:
Chest press
with bridge.

Flys on the ball

This exercise is a lot harder than the traditional fly exercises you're probably used to doing on a weight bench. Not only do you rest your upper back on the ball, but you also use your abs and hips to keep the ball from rolling out from under you.

To do this exercise, follow these steps:

1. **Lie with your upper back on the ball and bend your knees at a 90-degree angle.**
2. **Holding the weights in your hands, extend your arms straight up toward the ceiling and above your chest (see Figure 8-3a).**
3. **With your palms facing each other, slowly lower your arms out sideways (see Figure 8-3b).**
Your elbows will be slightly bent when you open them out to the side.
4. **Using your chest muscles, bring the weights back up toward the ceiling to the starting position.**



Figure 8-3:
Flies on
the ball.



Complete two sets of 10 to 15 repetitions.

A few do's and don'ts for this exercise:

- ✓ *Do* tighten your butt muscles to support your back and pelvis.
- ✓ *Do* keep your weights directly above your chest when you lift them overhead.
- ✓ *Don't* open your arms so wide that you arch your back.
- ✓ *Don't* forget to perform this exercise slowly, using controlled movements throughout.

Lat pullover on the ball

Working the lats (or *latissimus dorsi*) gives you a sculpted upper back and well-defined shoulders. Building up the lats also makes your waist appear smaller.

When you combine this exercise with the ball, you get the added benefits of working the butt and the hips as you press up into the classic bridge position. For this exercise, you need a 3- to 5-pound weight.

To do this exercise, follow these steps:

1. Lie with your upper back on the ball and keep your knees bent at a 90-degree angle.
2. Holding the weight in your hands, extend your arms straight above your chest toward the ceiling.
3. Slowly lower the weight behind your head, slightly bending your elbows (see Figure 8-4a).

Don't let the weight drop too far below your head. To avoid this problem, keep your elbows soft and slightly bent.

4. Raise the weight and your arms back toward the ceiling and above your chest (as Figure 8-4b shows).



Figure 8-4:
Lat pullover
on the ball.



Complete two sets of ten repetitions.

A few do's and don'ts for this exercise:

- ✓ *Do* avoid arching your back.
- ✓ *Do* keep your feet shoulder-width apart to help maintain your balance.
- ✓ *Don't* forget to keep a tight grip on the weight as you raise your arms above and behind your head.

Lower Back

Working the lower back on the exercise ball offers you a better alternative to the traditional methods of exercising the back because it provides support for the pelvis and lumbar spine at the same time.

By supporting the hips, the ball allows the lower body to go through a greater range of movements, enhancing the strengthening benefits to the back muscles and spine. Because of the *prone* (or face down) position used throughout this series of exercises, the following exercises support and strengthen the upper back as well as the lower back muscles.

Prone on the ball

Lying prone on the ball is great position for strengthening all the muscles along the spine. Lying prone on the ball also gives you good posture and balance.

To do this exercise, follow these steps:

- 1. Kneeling behind the ball, roll your body forward and to the other side so the ball supports your lower abdominal muscles.**

The ball will be under your hips, and your hands will rest on the floor in front of you.

- 2. Slowly raise your chest, creating a straight line from your shoulders to your feet (see Figure 8-5).**
- 3. Hold up your chest by using your back muscles for a few seconds; then relax your chest back onto the ball.**

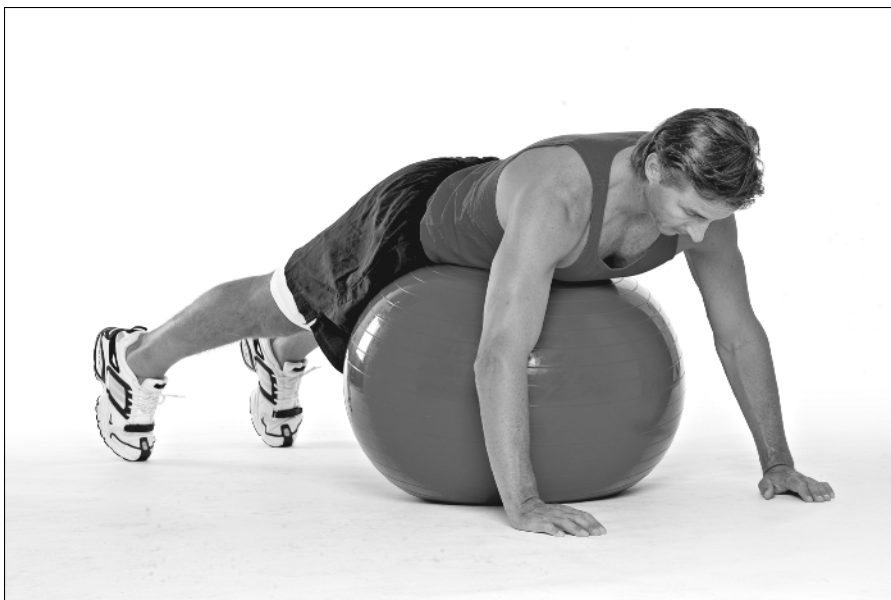


Figure 8-5:
Prone
position
on the ball.



Stay in this position for a few minutes, extending and relaxing. This movement gives you a feel for how you'll need to use the lower back muscles to stabilize yourself throughout this series of exercises.

A couple of do's and don'ts for this exercise:

- ✓ *Do* keep your feet close together to maintain your balance on the ball.
- ✓ *Don't* balance on your toes. Make sure that you're on the balls of your feet for support.

Prone leg raises

Prone leg raises test your strength and balance by using an alternating lifting motion for the lower body and a balancing movement for the upper body.

To do this exercise, follow these steps:

1. **Lie prone on the ball with your fingertips lightly touching the ground in front of you for support.**
2. **Keeping your body horizontal to the floor, raise one leg behind you to hip level (as Figure 8-6 shows).**

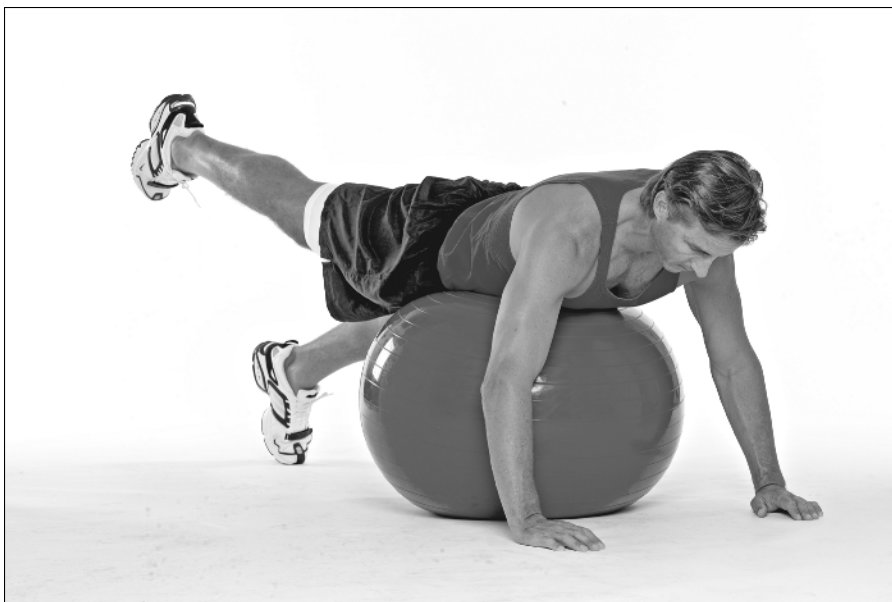


Figure 8-6:
Prone leg
raises.

The knee will be straight on the leg that's raised.

- 3. Hold the position for a few seconds before lowering the leg down to starting position and raising the opposite leg.**



Complete two sets of ten kicks on each leg, resting in between sets.

A few do's and don'ts for this exercise:

- ✓ *Do* keep your leg straight when you extend it behind you, forming a straight line from your toes to your shoulders.
- ✓ *Do* keep your eyes looking straight down at the floor to avoid hyper-extending your neck.
- ✓ *Don't* forget to kick from the butt using your gluteal muscles.

Alternating arm and leg raises

This exercise can be quite challenging because as you raise your arms and legs, you need to stabilize yourself on the ball at the same time in order to keep your balance.



Before you begin, try finding your balance by lifting both hands off the floor. By doing this, having better balance throughout this exercise will be easier.

To do this exercise, follow these steps:

1. Lie prone on the ball, resting your fingertips lightly on the floor in front of you.
2. Raise your right arm off the floor in front of you as you lift your left leg as far as hip level (see Figure 8-7a).
3. Lower your right arm back to the floor as you simultaneously lower your left leg.
4. Raise your left arm off the floor in front of you as you lift your right leg as far as hip level (see Figure 8-7b).
5. Lower your left arm back to the floor as you simultaneously lower your right leg.

Continue alternating arm and leg raises. Complete two sets of ten repetitions, resting between sets.

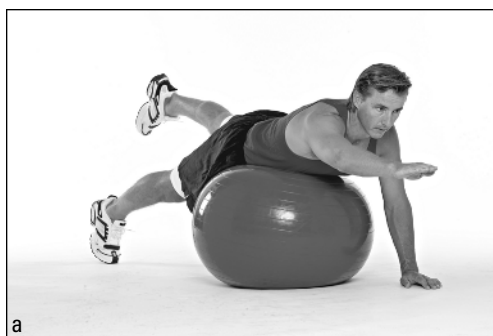


Figure 8-7:
Alternating
arm and
leg raises.



A few do's and don'ts for this exercise:

- ✓ *Do* keep your knees straight when you lift your leg behind you.
- ✓ *Do* use your butt to lift your leg, being sure to work from the gluteal muscles.
- ✓ *Don't* strain your neck. Keep your eyes looking straight down to the floor.

Amazing Abs!

The best way to get killer abs is by using the exercise ball because its round shape helps place extra emphasis on the abdominal muscles. Throughout these abdominal exercises, your body calls upon the stabilizing muscles (your core muscles) to support your weight on the ball, increasing the challenge and benefits.

Traditional abdominal crunches work the outer muscles known as the *rectus abdominus*. Working these muscles in conjunction with the deeper abdominal muscles called upon to stabilize your spine while using the ball is the best way to target the entire core of the body.

Abdominal curls

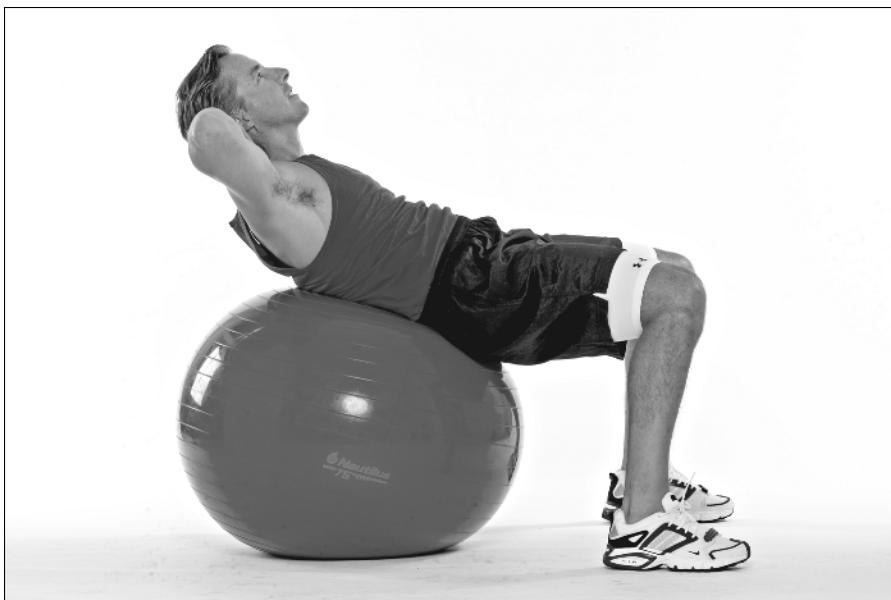
Perhaps the number-one exercise used on the ball is the abdominal curl. Harder than traditional curls and requiring more endurance, this abdominal exercise will be sure to kick your butt!

To do this exercise, follow these steps:

1. **Lie with the ball under your lower back and pelvis for support. Place your feet shoulder-width apart and keep your knees at a 90-degree angle.**
2. **With your hands behind your head and your elbows bent out to the sides, curl your body up halfway between a sitting and lying position (as Figure 8-8 shows).**

Keep your tailbone pressed down on the ball.

Figure 8-8:
Abdominal
curls.



3. Slowly roll back down onto the ball, one vertebrae at a time.

Complete two sets of 10 to 15 repetitions.

A few do's and don'ts for this exercise:



- ✓ *Do* draw your navel toward your spine when you contract your abdominal muscles to curl up.
- ✓ *Do* exhale as you lift up.
- ✓ *Do* curl up and roll back down one vertebrae at a time to keep from straining your back.
- ✓ *Don't* pull on your neck with your hands. Keep your gaze upward as you curl up to keep your neck in line with your spine.

Side crunch

The side crunch works the muscles that run along the waist otherwise known as the *obliques*. This exercise is great for men and women who want to define their waistlines and lose their love handles!

To do this exercise, follow these steps:

1. Kneeling on the floor, position your left hip and side of your body against the ball as you place your left arm on the ball for support. Straighten your right leg out to the side and bring your right arm behind your head, so your hand is touching the back of your head (see Figure 8-9a).

2. Crunch up, bringing your right shoulder and elbow down toward your rib cage and right leg as you exhale (see Figure 8-9b).

Be sure to keep your left hip and side against the ball at all times to keep from slipping.

3. Lower back down toward the ball as you slowly inhale.



Complete ten side crunches before switching sides.

A few do's and don'ts for this exercise:

- ✓ *Do* keep the foot on your extended leg flat on the floor at all times for balance.



Figure 8-9:
Trim and
tighten your
waist with
the side
crunch.



- ✓ Do place your foot against a wall if you find yourself slipping.
- ✓ Don't forget to exhale as you crunch up, bringing your elbow down toward your knee.

Roll away

Perhaps the second-most popular exercise for working the abdominal muscles is the roll away. This exercise is a great way to target your abs from the inside out.

To do this exercise, follow these steps:

1. **Kneeling in front of the ball, place your hands on the ball at arm's length (see Figure 8-10a).**
2. **As you contract your abdominal muscles and tuck in your butt, roll the ball away from you slightly so that your forearms rest on the ball (see Figure 8-10b).**
3. **Keeping your butt tucked in and your back straight, hold this movement for a few seconds before you return to starting position.**

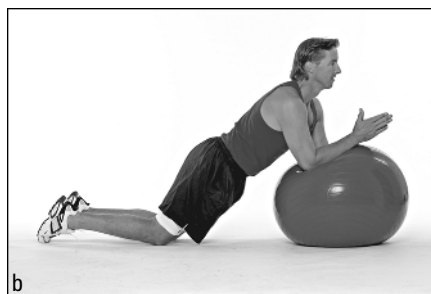
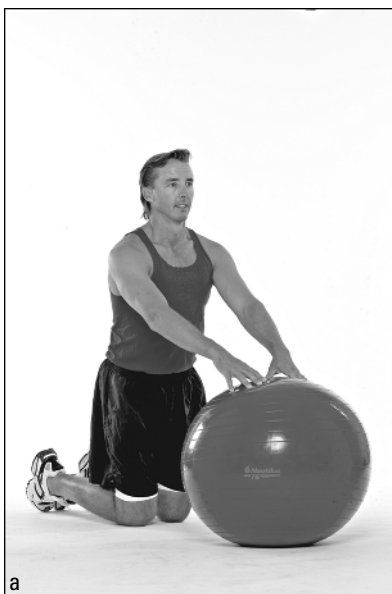


Figure 8-10:
Roll away.



To increase the challenge, roll the ball away from you a little farther. You can also try rolling the ball slightly from side to side.



Complete one set of 15 repetitions.

A few do's and don'ts for this exercise:

- ✓ *Do* kneel on a cushion or mat if your knees start hurting.
- ✓ *Do* keep your back long and straight to keep it from arching.
- ✓ *Don't* hold the movement for a few seconds when the ball is rolled out in front of you if you find this exercise too challenging. Simply roll the ball out and back without holding in between.

Oblique twists

Because of the twisting motion in this exercise, your waist and your oblique muscles get a workout along with your abs.

To do this exercise, follow these easy steps:

- 1. Lie with your back on the ball and your feet planted firmly out in front of you.**
Make sure you have your heels directly below your knees.
Your shoulders will not touch the ball, so they're free to move from side to side.
- 2. Bring your arms to your chest and rest your chin on your hands (see Figure 8-11a).**
- 3. Starting with your right shoulder, contract your abdominal muscles as you slowly lift and turn your body toward your left hip (see Figure 8-11b).**
- 4. Keep your body lifted for a moment, and then slowly lower your body to the starting position.**
- 5. Slowly lift your left shoulder as you contract your abdominal muscles and turn your body toward your right hip.**



Continue alternating your right and left side lifts for two sets of 12.

A few do's and don'ts to keep in mind:

- ✓ *Do* exhale before you contract your abdominal muscles and lift.
- ✓ *Do* rest your chin on your hands for support.
- ✓ *Don't* rush through this exercise. Take a moment to pause at the top of the lift.



Figure 8-11:
Oblique
twist.

Abdominal crunch

Doing abdominal crunches with the ball places the emphasis not only on the abs but also on the legs, butt, and hips. By grasping the ball under your knees, the larger abdominal muscles, or outer abdominals, get used a lot more intensely during this exercise.

To do this exercise, follow these steps:

1. Lying on the floor, rest your lower legs on the ball at a 90-degree angle (see Figure 8-12a).
2. As you tighten your abdominals, grasp the ball between your legs and pull toward you, lifting the ball from the floor.
3. With your hands on either side of your head, slowly lift your shoulders from the floor toward your knees (see Figure 8-12b).
4. Hold the lift for a few seconds and then slowly roll your shoulders back to the floor.

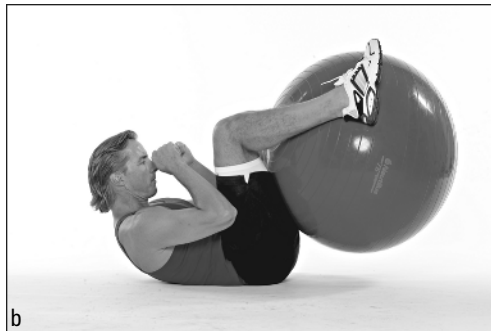


Figure 8-12:
Abdominal
crunch.



Complete ten repetitions.

A couple of do's and don'ts for this exercise:

- ✓ *Do* relax your neck as you curl up into a crunch.
- ✓ *Don't* forget to exhale as you curl up and inhale as you release back down.