

Chapter 1

Having a Ball Getting Fit

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding how the exercise ball got its start
 - ▶ Discovering how and why the ball works
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When you go to the gym, do you feel like hurling yourself onto a weight bench? Are you excited to get down on the floor and knock out a few dozen sit-ups? If you answered “no” to these questions, don’t worry — you’re in good company. In fact, those reasons are why the ball is becoming so popular. The exercise ball is *fun*! And, yes, it does conjure up some really great childhood memories of playing ball in the street or perhaps in your own backyard. So I guess the ball brings out the kid in all of us. And what a great way to approach working out!

In this chapter, you find out who came up with the idea of the exercise ball; what a ball workout can do for you, no matter your fitness level; and how to achieve a healthy lifestyle, both on and off the ball. Finally, at the end of this chapter, you discover two techniques that are the basis for any exercise on the ball — finding neutral spine and setting your abs. Now, let’s get the ball rolling!

A Little Background on the Ball

An Italian toymaker named Aquilino Cosani created the *exercise ball* or *stability ball* in 1963. Cosani developed a process for molding the balls out of plastic and then filling them with air and detailing the balls with bright colors. Exercise balls were first sold primarily in Europe to physical therapists and hospitals for rehabilitation under the name Gymnastik. (Later they were called “Swiss balls”

because of physical therapist Dr. Susan Klein-Vogelbach's use in Switzerland.) In 1981, Cosani started a new company called Gymnic. These two companies are still in Italy and are the major suppliers of exercise balls throughout the world.

By the late 1980s, physical therapists were using the exercise ball as a rehabilitation tool. In the United States, the first person to put an exercise ball to use was Joanne Posner-Mayer in San Francisco in 1989. Mayer and other physical therapists used the exercise ball for rehabilitating patients with neurological problems. Shortly after, exercise balls crossed over into the world of personal fitness.

Personal trainers began using the ball to enhance their clients' performances; top athletes around the world started using the ball to condition and train their bodies in a new way; and dancers incorporated the ball into their daily regimen to promote better balance and coordination. Before long, exercise balls had jumped into the mainstream in the 1990s. Gyms and workout facilities started offering personal trainers special training courses on the exercise ball and, from there, the ball jumped into the spotlight. With gyms and trainers now offering regular group classes on the ball, the exercise ball is being combined with resistance bands, medicine balls, weights, and other devices to continue making the ball more and more interesting.

The last step for the exercise ball was in-home use. In fact, many people have even replaced their office chairs with a ball. Studies have shown that replacing your chair with the ball increases your focus and concentration, improves your posture, and strengthens your back muscles. If you haven't rolled out your office chair and rolled in the ball, I suggest giving it a try for at least half the time that you sit at your desk.

Who Uses These Balls?

Looking at a simple rubber ball, the exercise ball doesn't seem too intimidating, does it? But these days, everyone from elite athletes to new moms are using the ball to make ordinary exercises more challenging. Traditional exercises, like a simple abdominal crunch, become more effective when you do them on the ball, and the results are twice as fast!

The ball makes a perfect training partner for whatever demographic you happen to fall under. It improves muscle strength and endurance and enhances balance and coordination. By combining the ball with weight training, you can train your core muscles as you pump up your biceps. And you can place the ball under your lower legs to do a few push-ups to get rock hard abs that you

wouldn't get just using the resistance of the floor. You can even flatten your post-pregnancy tummy by strengthening your pelvic floor and training your abs, which have been at rest for the last nine months.

Training on the ball really helps members of the following groups improve their level of fitness:

- ✓ **Seniors:** Seniors use the ball not only to improve their circulation and posture but also to help stretch and bend, which helps prevent falls.
- ✓ **Children:** Children use the ball to improve their focus and coordination while increasing their overall fitness level.
- ✓ **Patients:** Patients use the ball to relieve back pain and to strengthen hip and knee joints during post-surgery treatments.
- ✓ **Pregnant women:** Mothers-to-be use the ball to stay flexible and comfortable as their tummies grow and to alleviate back pain that the added pressure of carrying around a baby causes.
- ✓ **Exercise beginners:** Beginners use the ball to gain stability and balance and to increase flexibility to enhance future training.
- ✓ **Athletes:** Athletes use the ball to improve specific skills or sports-specific techniques needed within their individual field of expertise.
- ✓ **Yoga students:** Yoga students use the ball as an added base of support while they're moving through postures.
- ✓ **Pilates students:** Pilates students use the ball to assist in training their core strength and technique that many of the Pilates exercises emphasize.
- ✓ **Birthing moms:** Birthing moms alleviate labor pain by using the ball in different positions to support their body weight.
- ✓ **New moms:** New mommies use the ball to tone and strengthen their abdominal muscles after having a baby.
- ✓ **Body builders:** Body builders use the ball to alter their base of support and to add resistance.

Why Is the Ball a Great Workout Tool for Me?

Whether you're a serious athlete, a newcomer to exercise, or somewhere in between, reasons abound as to why you should work out on the ball. Besides being inexpensive and portable, exercise balls make working out more fun and interesting, and you can see many other physical benefits after using the ball for just a few weeks.

A ball to have around!

One of the greatest things about owning a ball is that it stares you right in the face as it sits in the corner of your office or your bedroom. Not too easy to avoid it, is it?

Because consistency is the key to exercise, keeping the ball in your house will not only inspire you but it will also help get you going for the long haul. Perhaps you feel like watching television, but you look around and the ball is right next to you. So you roll it out and watch your favorite program as you *sit on it*. Doesn't seem like much, does it? But it is. Just sitting on the ball puts you in touch with your stabilizing muscles and may get you thinking about actually using

them. Otherwise you may just plop down on the couch, and you know you aren't working any muscles that way!

And you can't forget the unavoidable fact that the ball is easy to transport, so you can use the ball wherever you go. Who needs a gym? Simply pump your ball using a hand pump or go to the nearest gas station and use its air pump, and you'll be ready to roll. Even if you take the ball with you and just sit on it to watch one of your favorite in-room movies, you'll be working toward something — consistency. Not too bad for a simple, round, slippery ball, huh?

Here's a list of the most compelling reasons why you should use the exercise ball:

- ✓ The ball provides an *unstable base* (meaning it's difficult to keep still), which makes it an excellent tool for doing challenging exercises that require great strength and control.
- ✓ The ball strengthens your body's core by allowing you to train the deeper abdominal muscles that other pieces of fitness equipment don't reach.
- ✓ You train one muscle group while you use the others for balancing, so the ball helps you tone your entire body.
- ✓ The ball's round shape makes doing back stretches easier and greatly improves your flexibility.
- ✓ Performing abdominal exercises on the ball rather than on the floor significantly increases the tension on your tummy muscles, resulting in a six-pack.
- ✓ As you hold yourself steady on the ball, you get better posture and balance for a more graceful appearance.
- ✓ You can adapt the ball to your own level of fitness simply by keeping the ball closer to your torso, or the core of your body. (As you progress, moving the ball away from your body's core toward your lower legs and feet increases the difficulty.)

- ✓ Ball exercises use so many of your major muscle groups that your heart rate stays elevated throughout your workout. Ball exercises also improve your cardiovascular system and burn fat with a low-impact workout.
- ✓ The exercise ball is light and portable, which makes it more convenient than other fitness equipment.
- ✓ Ball exercises are versatile and easy to modify, so any age group can use them!

Principles of Using the Ball

The principles of using the exercise ball come into play as soon as you combine the instability of the ball (caused by its round shape) with the smooth, hard surface of the floor, which is stable. Just like when practicing Pilates or yoga, you need to follow guidelines to understand how to use the ball. So before you begin your workout, read up on the following principles to gain a better understanding of why the ball is so challenging in the first place.

Proper positioning

You can use quite a few positions with the ball, and they're all dictated by which ball exercises you choose to do. Like with any other piece of equipment, positioning along with proper form is very important.

To make this point a little clearer for you, the following is a list of the most-common ball positions. I also include an example of an exercise that you can do with each position:

- ✓ **Sitting on the ball:** Abdominal curls (being sure to keep your lower back on the ball as you bend your knees at a 90-degree angle and you rest your feet on the floor)
- ✓ **Lying backward on the ball:** Backbend stretch (being sure to sit on the ball first and then slowly walk your legs forward until your back is lying backward over the ball)
- ✓ **Lying sideways on the ball:** Lateral curls or side stretch (being sure to first kneel on the floor and position your right hip and side against the ball)
- ✓ **Lying forward on the ball or on your tummy:** The drape, or draping your body over the ball (being sure to place your feet on the floor behind you and your hands on the floor in front of you)

- ✓ **Lying on the floor with your legs on the ball:** Hamstring lifts or roll away (being sure to press your lower legs into the ball and rest your arms by your sides on the floor)

Range of motion

Because the ball moves freely, it creates a wider range of motion for working your joints and keeping them flexible as opposed to working with a weight bench. When you train on the ball, you use a full range of motion and recruit additional muscle groups to maintain proper form.

The ball's full range of motion serves as a kind of *check and balance system* because, if you don't do each exercise correctly, you fall on your butt! Keeping the ball steady lets you know immediately whether or not you're maintaining good posture and proper form.

Coordination and balance

When you take away the stability of a chair and sit on the ball, you change your center of gravity and alter the way you need to sit; that is, you sit up straight (otherwise known as having good posture).



Working on coordination and balance at the same time recruits the brain and the muscles, so you get more bang for your buck while working out on the ball. Using your *stabilizing muscles* (deeper abdominal muscles) to maintain your balance and concentrating so you don't fall off the ball may be the two most important principles of working with the ball.

Reaping the Benefits

Besides developing good overall muscle tone for your entire body, the ball provides numerous other benefits that range anywhere from rehabilitating back, hip, and knee injuries to delivering a powerful workout to improve core stability, posture, and muscle balance. You also improve your flexibility and your cardiovascular system by using a low-impact workout.

Following are a few of the most important benefits for anyone wanting to use the ball and get a little background on what exactly you're supposed to be working. Additionally, you can find a list of the benefits of using the ball during pregnancy in Chapter 18, and I cover the benefits of working out on the ball for seniors in Chapter 19.

Back and spine health

The ball is great if you have back problems because it supports your lower back as you exercise and stretch. And that's exactly why physical therapists and chiropractors started using the ball for therapy. So many people suffer from back strain and injuries these days that thinking of anyone you know who hasn't is a challenge. Take my uncle, for example, who recently came home from the chiropractor's office with a ball (which I was sure would sit in the corner and collect dust) but, to my surprise, he uses it every day! What other object can you think of that you can simply lay your body over and feel instant relief? Not too many.

You can find many simple stretches in Chapter 14 and other chapters that provide not only back stretches but also a series of strengthening exercises for your entire back.

Killer abs

You can expect to get strong abs from training on the ball. And, as you may already know, strong abs means a strong, healthy back to help support all your movements throughout the day. In fact, studies have shown that people like to work their abs more than any other body part.

So why is the ball so great for giving you killer abs and strengthening your back? Well, that question has two very good answers:

- ✔ When you lie with your back on the floor to do a sit-up, you're using a stable base to support your back. This flattened-out position results in moving and training your abdominal muscles in only one direction: upward as you lift your shoulders off the floor and bring your elbows to your knees.
- ✔ When you do abdominal exercises on the ball, you increase the level of resistance because your spine curves naturally around the ball when you lift up to do a crunch, plus you're able to use a full range of motion rather than the limited one you get when you use the floor. Simply put, because of the

ball's round shape, you get a lot more range of motion in your spine than you do using the flatness of the floor.

Doing abdominal exercises on the ball is more challenging in other ways, too. Because you need to incorporate other muscle groups to help you keep your balance on the ball, you use more muscles and strengthen more than just your tummy area:

- ✔ You use your glutes when you squeeze them together and contract as you lift up toward the ceiling.
- ✔ Your hamstrings contract as you press down into the floor to keep the ball steady.
- ✔ Your hip flexors tighten and release as you bend at the waist into the curled-up position of an abdominal crunch.

As an end result of training on the ball, you can expect to see improved posture, increased balance, and increased strength in your back muscles. Now that's what I call amazing!

Core stability

With so much talk these days about working your “core,” you may be wondering what the heck your core actually is. Well, the core is the muscles in your body that stabilize and support all your movements. Your core, or what people used to call your “midsection,” is made up of the deep abdominal and back muscles that work as stabilizers for your entire body. These muscles are the “deep” muscles because, although you cannot see them, they maintain the core stability in your body.



The three muscles in the midsection, or “trunk” of your body, are

- ✓ *Transverse abdominus*: The deep abdominal muscles
- ✓ *Multifidus*: The back muscles that support the lumbar spine
- ✓ *Quadratus lumborum*: The muscles of the lower back that maintain spinal and pelvic balance

These muscles work together to protect your spine and help with everyday activities. Lifting, throwing, bending, reaching, and running use the stabilizer muscles, so keeping them well-conditioned is extremely important. Without conditioned stabilizer muscles, simple movements like pulling, walking, and running go unsupported and leave you at risk for injuries.

Training on the ball is one way to work this group of hard-to-reach muscles. Just by sitting on the ball, you’re able to activate the stabilizer muscles and not only improve your posture, but you also feel more in touch with your center of gravity. This is just one of the many benefits you get from adding exercise balls to your fitness program.

The additional core muscles that lie deep within your body and are impossible to see from the outside include the pelvic floor and are otherwise described as the muscles that run from your tailbone to your pubic bone. (I like to refer to the pelvic floor as the “girdle” muscles because they keep everything sucked in!)



To tighten the pelvic floor, you simply activate the muscles you use when you’re desperately looking for a bathroom and can’t find one! (Your muscles should feel as if you’re trying to “hold it” or keep from going to the bathroom.) Just sitting on the ball activates these muscles. At first, keeping your balance may be difficult because the ball is an unstable base and requires you to have great strength in your back and abdominal muscles.

When you sit on a chair or a weight bench at the gym, you certainly don’t use any of these stabilizing muscles that your body calls upon while you’re working out on the ball. By bringing your feet closer together when you’re sitting on the ball, you can intensify your workout by altering your base of support. After a few sessions on the ball, you will become more aware and be able to

identify how your core should feel when you're engaging it and will soon be able to maintain your balance on the ball just as you would if you were sitting on a chair.

For training your core on the ball, the rule of thumb is: The farther away the ball is from the core of your body, the more difficult maintaining your balance is. For example, when doing a push-up on the ball, placing the ball underneath your lower legs makes doing the push-up much easier because the ball is closer to your core. To increase the difficulty, all you have to do is roll the ball out to your feet so it's farther away from the center of your body, and so maintaining your balance is harder.

Posture

Being a dancer for many years in New York, I was always told to press my back "into" the floor or to have a "flat" back. Nowadays, experts have found that maintaining the slight natural curve in your spine is healthier. When using the ball, maintaining this natural curve is important to help you keep from arching your back and to protect the spine.

Chapter 4 shows photo illustrations of the three different kinds of postures you can use when sitting on the ball. The best of the three is called *neutral spine*. I describe the benefits of maintaining a neutral spine in this chapter and throughout this book.

Muscle balance

When one muscle group is stronger than its opposing muscle group, this causes a *muscle imbalance*. Muscles that need to work together to perform a particular task, such as the triceps and biceps, are a good example of muscle groups that can have a muscle imbalance.

The muscles that are in the front of your body, or the *anterior muscles*, are naturally stronger than the muscles that lie along the back of your body, otherwise known as the *posterior muscles*, because you use them more frequently throughout the day. To complicate the matter further, most people tend to over-train their anterior muscles and neglect their posterior muscles, which can create bad posture and additional imbalances.

The ball offers a solution to muscle imbalances because it supports the lower back and other posterior muscles during training. To look and feel good, whether you're coming or going, you need to train your buttocks, back, and hamstrings. And maybe concentrate a little less on those biceps!

Beyond the Ball: Being Fit for Life?

With so many diet products, fitness gimmicks, sports drinks, and magic pills on the market today, knowing what really works and what you really need to do to get and stay healthy is tough.

Although you've heard or read it all before, the answer is really pretty simple: You need to dedicate yourself and have lots of patience. Here are a few more things you can do that will definitely do the trick.

Eating a healthy diet

Some people think that if they exercise, they don't have to watch what they eat. Although exercise does give you more leeway, you still need to be mindful of the quality and quantity of food you eat each day because your body has to burn off what you eat through your daily activities. Portion control or cutting calories works best for just about everybody.



Try eating five or six times a day to stave off hunger and to keep you going all day long. Eating on this schedule is better than waiting all day to eat one huge meal at night when you have no time left to burn off all those calories!

To keep your energy up and your blood sugar from dipping (plus boost your metabolism), each small meal should be around 300 to 500 calories, which translates into an apple, a yogurt, and a slice of cheese.

Knowing what a balanced diet includes these days is tough, especially if you've ever taken a look at the Food Guide Pyramid. If you read that guide, you'll be eating six to eleven servings of bread, rice, pasta, and cereal. Yikes! A good balanced diet consists of some form of protein (lean meats, fish, and tofu), veggies, fruits, dairy, and *good* carbs (see the list of good carbs in the sidebar "My take on the low-carb craze"). In addition, staying away from white sugar and white flour and steering toward whole grains and whole oats should help you on your way to eating healthier in no time.

Having an effective workout program

To avoid heart disease and other chronic illnesses, you have to fit in some form of exercise to get your circulation flowing and your heart pumping. You'll also see and feel a difference in your energy level in no time after you try one of the following suggested workouts.

- ✔ **Aerobic exercise:** Try to spend at least 20 to 60 minutes three to five days a week doing some form of aerobic exercise. Activities such as walking, hiking, biking, jogging, cross-country skiing, and skating are great ways to get in shape. But make sure you choose an exercise that you enjoy and can easily include in your schedule.
- ✔ **Strength training:** Depending on your individual fitness level, strength-training sessions should start at 30 minutes and increase to 60 minutes as you feel the need for more intensity and a higher weight. Be sure to take a look at the weight-training chapter (Chapter 13) and the shapely arms chapter (Chapter 7), which offer a variety of strength-training exercises on the ball.
- ✔ **Flexibility training:** You should do flexibility and stretching exercises at least 20 minutes a day or three times a week in an hourly session. To increase your flexibility, try the exercises in Chapter 12 (doing Pilates on the ball) or Chapter 17 (doing yoga on the ball). To get a good stretch, try the exercises in Chapter 14 (a stretching workout on the ball).

My take on the low-carb craze

I couldn't get away without discussing the war on carbs (carbohydrates) somewhere in this book. Well, this info may come as a surprise to some of you, but all carbs are not bad! Indeed, some carbs are good, and keeping them in your diet is important so your body doesn't lose the precious muscle that's responsible for burning up a great deal of your daily calories. And we all know that quick-fix diets (like no-carb diets) are hard to maintain and, in the long run, end up backfiring, right?

Just as skipping meals all day only leads to failure (you eat like an animal when nighttime comes), so does trying to eat only bacon and sausage all day. The idea may sound good to you right now but, after a few weeks of stuffing your face with only protein, believe me, you'll be craving some fresh fruit. So here are a few hints on good carbs and bad carbs; and remember, like anything in life, moderation is the key:

- ✔ **The good carbs:** Fresh fruits, *whole grain* breads and cereals, vegetables, oatmeal, beans, potatoes, or anything that's not

processed and contains some small amount of fiber.

- ✔ **The bad carbs:** Sugar, starches made from *white* flour (cookies and cakes), white bread, white rice, white pasta, soda, and any sugary food, such as ice cream. Basically, anything that's processed or refined is a bad carb.

Some really good snack choices are still available when you're watching your carb intake. A few of these are dried fruit, fresh fruits, cheese crackers, peanut butter crackers, trail mix, yogurt, vanilla wafers, grain crackers, and granola bars. Also, many companies offer low-carb alternatives (which means they make their foods without *white* sugar and *white* flour).

People who are on a low-carb diet should increase their fiber intake and drink plenty of water to keep their bodies hydrated and to replace the lost fiber that comes from incorporating many forms of carbohydrates in your diet.

Don't forget cross training

A workout can get boring when you've done it for a while. So give yourself a pat on the back for mastering it, but move on to something else — quickly. Unfortunately, when people get bored with their workout, they may get discouraged with working out altogether. *Cross training*, or doing a variety of workouts, not only gives you something new to master, but it also changes your body almost overnight. For example, if you're a swimmer and feel that you're over-training the muscles in your upper body, taking a step aerobics class not only can add variety to your fitness routine, but it will work and build the muscles in your lower body and legs, leaving you looking shapelier and stronger in no time. Now that's exciting!

Cross training is essential to any exercise program because it keeps you from getting tired of one particular workout. If you're a runner and are

used to running everyday, the muscles in your body will eventually reach a plateau and you'll stop seeing improvement in your level of fitness.

Here are a few suggestions for keeping things fresh and staying in tip-top shape:

- ✓ If you're into cardio, try working your upper body by lifting weights or using resistance bands to strengthen and tone the muscles that don't get an intense workout while you're running or walking.
- ✓ If you're into lifting weights, you may want to try taking a yoga or Pilates class to stretch out the muscles and increase your flexibility.

Avoiding boredom and keeping your fitness regimen new and challenging will provide your body with changes that may surprise even you.

In addition, make sure that each workout includes an ample warm-up and a cool down. See Chapters 5 and 10 for ways to warm up and cool down using the ball.



Most importantly, listen to your body. Slow down or rest when you feel out of breath or uncomfortable. Increasing your exercise time and intensity too quickly sets you up for injury.

Setting realistic goals

Being motivated to start something new is great, but buying all the equipment you need for a new sport and then not using it or joining a new gym and never using your membership isn't. Slow and steady wins the race. Keep your ultimate goal in mind as you begin something new and have the patience and determination to see it through. You'll see the results sooner rather than later. Some good guidelines for a beginner are

Got 10 minutes?

You can find so many excuses to use to keep from working out. But probably the number-one excuse is that you don't have the time! Well, that old excuse is null and void in the world of health and fitness, because the latest trend in getting your daily cardio and toning up is by doing ten-minute workouts twice daily or even once daily, if that's all you have time for.

Many a man or woman felt defeated, thinking he or she needed a whole hour or an uninterrupted segment of time to get in a good workout. The solution? *Hi-Lo Cardio*. Anyone and everyone who has ten minutes can greatly benefit from these broken down training intervals, even if you have to do them over your lunch hour, while your baby naps, instead of taking a shower (only

new moms are excused), or before you head out the door to start your day.

Try doing any cardiovascular activity (say the treadmill) for three minutes at a low intensity to warm up your body; then switch to a moderate intensity for two minutes; follow it with two minutes of the highest intensity you can handle; then slow your intensity for the last three minutes. This workout boosts your metabolism and spikes your heart rate into the fat-burning zone. And all in ten minutes! Doing cardio ball exercises (see Chapter 15), jumping rope, doing the elliptical trainer, running up and down stairs, spinning on a bike, and doing jumping jacks all do the trick.

- ✔ **Pick something that you can easily fit into your schedule and use consistently.** The recommended workout time for someone just getting started is two to three times a week for 30 minutes or longer. As you build your endurance and level of fitness, you should gradually increase your level of intensity to three or four times a week for 30 minutes or longer.
- ✔ **Avoid over-training.** When you first begin exercising, never let yourself get fatigued to the point that you can't hold a conversation or are short of breath.



A good starting point is to buy an exercise ball (because they're inexpensive and a lot of fun). Use it right away by replacing your desk chair for at least one hour a day while you're working at your computer. You'll notice a difference right away because when you're using the ball as a chair, you're forced to sit up straight with both feet on the floor to remain steady and to engage your stabilizing muscles. At the end of the day, you'll feel you did something better for yourself than just sitting around.

Get Ready, Get Set . . .

To get familiar with the ball, first you have to develop an awareness of how you're sitting and what you need to do to stay seated on it. The following exercises help you get acquainted with the proper alignment (neutral spine)

that you need to use and help you set your abs, which you need to do before you perform each exercise. Both these exercises are fun and important activities to master before you begin your workout. After you master finding neutral spine and setting your abs, you'll be ready for anything on the ball!

Finding neutral spine

When your car is in neutral, you know that it's in a "pause" mode, but does neutral mean the same thing in physiology? You often hear the term "neutral spine" used in exercise, but what is it really?

Being in neutral spine is really an active position where you engage your lower abdominal and pelvic stabilizer muscles to create a "girdle" to enable your body to protect itself from injury.

To keep your back from arching and to practice neutral spine, try this exercise in front of a mirror:

- 1. Stand facing the side as you look into a mirror.**
- 2. Imagine a ruler extending along your back from the top of your shoulders or shoulder blades to the bottom of your pelvis or hips.**
- 3. Stand tall and straight so everything stacks up neatly as follows: head, shoulders, rib cage, pelvis, and legs.**

You can also try this exercise by lying with your back on the floor:

- 1. Lie on the floor with your back pressed down. If your back is flat, you shouldn't be able to put your hand between the floor and your back.**
- 2. As you exhale, bring your knees to your chest and think about the placement of your back on the floor.**
- 3. Hold your knees into your chest for a few moments, and then release your legs back to the floor.**

Notice how your back feels now. Is it pressed down and not arching? Can you feel the neutral position of your body as it relaxes on the floor but is still actively pressing downward? This position is called *neutral spine* and is the proper alignment that you use with all exercise ball programs.

Setting your abs



Working out on the ball is different than sitting in a chair because the ball is round and has an uneven surface. At first, these differences may not seem like a big deal to you but, in reality, it is! You need time and practice to have control and master some, if not all, the exercises in this book.

To do the workouts in this book, you need to know how to tighten your abdominal muscles while keeping your spine long and straight. This position is called “setting your abs.” Setting your abs allows you to develop strength throughout your core muscles and helps you develop an awareness of where your movements originate.

The following is a list of the steps you should take each time you get on the ball to set your abs:

1. **Sit tall on the ball with your feet hip-distance apart and firmly planted on the ground.**
2. **Take a deep breath and visualize a belt tightening around your waist.**
3. **Let your rib cage lift and fill with air.**
4. **Place one hand below your belly button and feel the tightening and lifting.**
5. **Place your other hand on the small of your back to feel the natural curve of your spine as you’re sitting tall on the ball.**
6. **As you exhale, keep your hand on your lower abdominal muscles or below your belly button to make sure the tightening remains.**

When you set your abs properly, you should feel that you’re ready for anything, as if someone were going to punch you in the stomach and you were bracing yourself for the punch.

After a while, setting your abs will become almost second nature to you. You’ll be able to see the difference in your posture immediately and in how you move throughout your day.



You never want to hold your breath when you’re working out on the ball because as soon as you let it out, you may lose your balance.

