

# Birth Ball Workout

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**W**ould you believe that one of the most effective exercise tools on the market today looks like a giant beach ball? First used for rehabilitation by physical therapists in the early 1900s, Resistaballs (a.k.a. stability balls, Swiss balls, physioballs, fitballs) are now found in health clubs and fitness centers everywhere. Aside from their use in the fitness setting, Resistaballs have also made their debut in the labor and birthing arena, where they are known as birth balls. Birth balls are touted by doulas and midwives as invaluable tools for childbirth because they allow laboring women to comfortably position their bodies in ways that help labor progress.

## The “Core” of the Matter

Core training is the buzzword in fitness these days. The core muscles support the midsection and spine, and the largest muscle groups

comprising the core include the abdominals and back. Resistaball training is highly effective in targeting these muscles. Even when you are training other muscle groups, the abdominal and back muscles are working together to balance and stabilize your body on the ball. This is exactly how these muscles function in real life when you go to pick up your baby, the baby carrier, a diaper bag and all the other things moms end up packing around. Exercising with a Resistaball is one of the most effective means of preparing your body for the stresses of pregnancy and the marathon of labor. It can help you avoid some pregnancy-related back pain and give you more pushing power when it's time to birth your baby.

## Posture Perfect

Maintaining proper posture throughout the day can be quite a feat when you're expecting. When exercising

on the ball, you are constantly challenged to be aware of your posture and maintain good body alignment by contracting important stabilizing muscles. This works your abdominal and back muscles like never before. Over time, ball training will build endurance in your postural muscles and help you develop a subconscious muscle memory that helps your body maintain good posture throughout the day. Try sitting on the ball while at the computer or watching TV. Your abdominal and back muscles will be working to keep you upright on the ball.

## Precautions

Before trying any of the exercises below, read through these safety reminders:

- Consult your healthcare provider before embarking on any exercise program.
- If you experience any pain or discomfort while exercising, STOP.
- Exercise in an area free from obstructions.
- Breathe normally. Holding your breath could be detrimental to both you and your baby.
- For more lateral (side-to-side) stability, consider using a Resist-a-Roll®, also known as the “egg ball.”
- Make sure you use a burst-resistant ball.
- During pregnancy, use your birth ball with a spotter or exercise partner, especially if you are new to exercise. You may also want to consult with a professional trainer if you are unfamiliar with this type of exercise.

## The Exercises

The following exercises come from Sheila Watkins, author of *Prenatal Training with Resistaball*. Perform the strengthening exercises three times a week on non-consecutive days. The stretches may be performed on a daily basis.



### Seated Lumbar Mobility

Sit tall on the ball (extend your spine, keep your ears positioned over your shoulders, lift your chest and pull your shoulders back and down; see photo A). Place your feet shoulder-width apart, keep your abdominals tight and hold a kegel contraction (tightening the vaginal and rectal muscles that make up the pelvic floor). Concentrate on moving just your pelvis; avoid using your legs. Move your pelvis front-to-back



and side-to-side in a circle and a figure eight (photos B and C). This will work your abdominal and back muscles, and can be used as a comfort position during labor.



leg (photo E). This works your abs, your back, the front of your thigh and the front and middle of the shoulder (if you're lifting your arms).

### Seated Marching

Sit tall on the ball with your feet shoulder-width apart. Keep both hands on the ball and lift one foot at a time off the floor as if you were marching (photo D). Progress to lifting the opposite arm as you lift your

### Standing Wall Squat

Stand with the ball between your lower back and the wall. Position your feet hips-width apart and just in front of your hips with your toes pointed slightly outward (photo F). Lean gently backward against the ball, bend your knees and slowly lower your hips and buttocks until your upper legs are parallel to the floor (photo G). Keep your knees pointing forward. This works the front of your buttocks, calves, inner thighs and the front of your thigh. It will strengthen your legs for labor.



### C-Shape Pushback

Place your ball up against a wall and lean back against it (photo H). Curl your upper body into a "C" shape by pushing into the ball with your lower back and contracting your abdominals (photo I). Return to starting position. This exercise strengthens the abdominal wall, which helps you push during labor.



### Pelvic Tilt

Kneel behind the ball, place your hands on it and roll it forward, bending at the hips (photo J). Position your hips over your knees with your torso parallel to the floor. Draw your navel to your spine and





curl your tailbone forward (photo K). Think of shortening and then lengthening the distance between your ribs and hips. Return to a neutral position. This works your abs and is another great comfort position during labor.

**Prone Kneeling Chest Stretch**

Kneel in a prone position with one arm on the ball and the other on the floor (photo L). Lower your torso toward the floor until you feel a stretch through your chest and shoulder. Keep your hips over your knees.



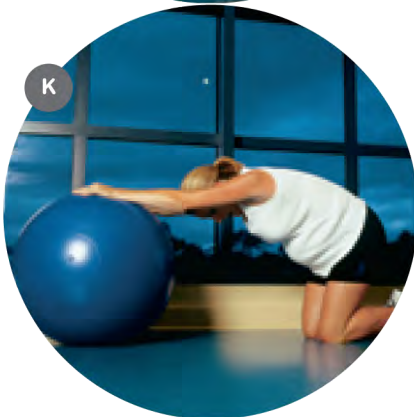
**Trunk Stretch**

Sit tall on the ball with your feet hips-width apart. Position one arm straight along the side of your body. Raise the other arm straight overhead with your palm facing upward (photo M). Roll the ball slightly to the side and reach up and across to the opposite side until you feel a gentle stretch along the side of your body. Repeat on the other side. Remember this relaxing position during labor!



**Seated Hip Flexor Stretch**

Sit upright on the ball with your left hip on the ball and your right hip off. Bend your right knee, place your foot flat on the floor and put your hands behind your buttocks. Straighten your left leg backward along the side of the ball with your toes on the floor, if possible (photo N). Roll the ball forward slightly and lean your upper body forward until you feel a gentle stretch along the front of your hip and the shin of your left leg. Repeat on the other side. This is a great stretch for expecting moms because it works the hip flexors, which are usually tight during pregnancy. 🍌



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*Trainer at The Sporting Club One In La Jolla, CA. Model: Mom-to-be Karen Morton. Makeup: Robert Bennett for Jet Set.*

**Ball Sizing Guidelines and Tips**

- If you're 5'8" or shorter, use a 55 cm (21-inch) ball. If you're 5' 9" or taller, use a 65 cm (25-inch) ball.
- In general, when you're seated on the ball, your knees should be level with your hips. The firmer the ball the harder it will be to balance on it. During pregnancy, you might want to consider using a large, soft ball.