

# Can Exercise Balls Replace the Office Chair?

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The idea of using an exercise ball, or yoga ball, in place of an office chair at work seems to be an attractive substitute to some employees. Human resource staff, employee health personnel, and others are being asked by employees if they can sit on a yoga or exercise ball at work. This leads to the question: are these balls a good option in the work environment?

## Benefits of Using Exercise Balls

The use of an exercise ball requires muscle activation. People use them to improve core strength, stability, and balance. They are a popular, beneficial part of exercise routines for many and are frequently used in physical therapy.

When used in place of an office chair, some not-so-serious benefits include:

- You can bounce on your chair while waiting for a page to reload.
- You burn about four more calories per hour than sitting in a “regular” chair.
- You can color coordinate the ball with your surroundings.

## Challenges of Yoga Ball Seating

Should yoga balls be used in the office environment? With such interest, several studies have been done to evaluate this question. Good ergonomic seating requires numerous ways to adjust to allow for proper seated postures. Exercise balls, even those used with a chair-style frame, do not provide sufficient adjustability. The following has also been found to be true:

- Exercise balls are not advisable for long periods of sitting. After a while, employees are just as likely to slouch.<sup>1</sup>
- While air can be let out and various sizes purchased, they are not easily height adjustable.
- It would be difficult, if not impossible, to prevent awkward postures in the shoulders, wrists, and other areas.
- They increase pressure on the spine and can cause soft tissue compression.<sup>2</sup>
- Most do not have adequate back support.
- Employees can fall off while reaching or moving while on a ball.

- While newer versions have arm rests attached, they are not adjustable.

## Evaluate the Chair and Workstation Setup

When a request to use a yoga ball is received, first seek to understand the reason for the request. Next determine if the issue can be resolved using solutions backed by sound ergonomic principles. If the workstation is a challenge, then evaluate the work area setup and chair to determine if they are appropriate or if adjustments are needed.

Here are areas to consider:

1. Check with the employee to see what the challenges are. Certain accommodations may be needed.
2. Use a fully adjustable office chair. Add lumbar support if needed.
3. Ensure the chair, in combination with the workstation, is set up correctly to promote good seated posture. An employee sitting in a correctly set up chair will have their feet flat on the floor, hips and knees at 90-degree angles, with two or three finger widths of space between the legs and the chair front. Support should be provided in the lumbar area, and the seat back should allow body movement. Lastly, adjustable armrests should be lowered just below the elbows so they are not used while keying.
4. Consider using a sit-to-stand workstation to vary sitting and standing throughout the day.
5. Take breaks from sitting throughout the day that result in standing and moving around.

Use of an exercise ball provides benefit when part of a well-rounded exercise program or physical therapy workout. Yet this ball does not seem to be a good fit in the workplace where prolonged sitting occurs and awkward postures can result. Correct chair and workplace setup and varying sitting and standing continue to be a vital part of creating a comfortable, productive workplace.

## Sources

1. Humantech. Just Say No To Exercise Balls In The Office. Aug 5, 2015. Taken on July 17, 2017 from <http://www.humantech.com/just-say-no-to-exercise-balls-in-the-office/>
2. Gregory, Diane and Nadine Dunk et al. Stability Ball Versus Office Chair: Comparison of Muscle Activation and Lumbar Spine Posture During Prolonged Sitting. Human Factors. Spr 2006. Taken on July 17, 2017 from <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/b2da/74251e88a22d5db0bebe72851d609d7329cc.pdf>

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