

Active sitting isn't just 'one of those weird things that people who make their own yogurt do.' It's the perfect exercise for our multitasking lives, writes **LOUISA McCORMACK**

On the ball



KEVIN VAN PAASSEN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Ball benefits

The burn. Sitting on a ball burns more calories than planting yourself on a regular chair.

The target. Active sitting targets the tough-to-tone torso.

The posture. Sit up straighter and you'll stand up straighter.

The exercise. It's a workout even on the days you can't make it the gym.

The flow. Improved energy circulation boosts productivity — hey, maybe you'll really be able to end your workday on time.

Sit tips

Choose the right size ball. The softer the ball, the less challenging it will be.

Sit tall. Imagine you're a puppet with a string pulling your head upward toward the ceiling.

Suck it in. Pull your bellybutton into your spine, as if you're wearing a corset.

Balance yourself. Plant your feet firmly, hip-width apart.

Easy does it. Move smoothly, no jerking.

One roll at a time. Start slowly and work your way up to a full day.

— Louisa McCormack

Multidisciplinary designer Jason Halter, pictured here with his daughter Frederique, has been working on the ball for several years. He appreciates how active sitting helps fight the at-computer slouch: 'You don't slink back into your chair and become one with your monitor,' he says.

Core training isn't just the buzz at the gym, it's becoming a goal at the office too, as the fitness-savvy trade in their \$1,000 Aeron chairs for \$40 stability balls.

"Balancing on the ball encourages spinal alignment and continuously engages back and abdominal muscles," explains Jane Clapp, co-author of *Working on the Ball* (Andrews McMeel Publishing, \$13.95), a frisky new guide to exercising in your skirt suit at your cubicle. "The effort is subtle, but the results accumulate. Long term, posture definitely improves."

"It certainly caused a bit of a stir when I first started," recalls Toronto lawyer Daina Groskaufmanis, currently enrolled in the Harvard University master of laws program. "The longer I sat on the ball the more comfortable other people became with it. At least one other lawyer got one as well. The ball forces you to sit up. And if it's been a long day, hey, you can bend over backwards and stretch out."

Trend-forward industries such as

the film business already have their share of ball users. While working as the head carpenter on the Toronto set of *16 Blocks* last summer, Al Letts was not alone on the ball: The production office was full of them.

"Anything that's healthy is encouraged in those atmospheres," Letts says. "It's more comfortable than an office chair because it's got spring. At the end of the day, you've actually had a good workout and not even noticed."

You're not likely to get abs of steel, but your back pain might vanish. Tom Carter, registered physiotherapist and manager of the Canadian Back Institute's Woodbridge, Ont., clinic, stands behind the ball as therapy: "If people adopt a more arched position for the back while seated, they feel better. On the ball, they're able to roll their hips backwards slightly and maintain that arch, typically for between 10 and 30 minutes. What people will do is alternate or get up and move around. If you have a work structure such that you're moving around on a paced basis, great."

"I was a total skeptic. I thought this was just one of those weird things that people who make their own yogurt do," broadcast researcher Sharon Flynn says. She resolved to start using the ball at work this New Year. "That pain you get between the shoulder blades from hunching over a computer? I don't get that any more. Also, it's fun. You can bounce when you're waiting for something to download."

Flynn rolls her ball under her desk every evening. And she's lending it out to the curious while she's away at a conference. Admittedly, her client meetings still take place in the company boardroom where there are plenty of chairs.

The stability ball originated in Italy in 1963 as a toy. Soon thereafter, a Swiss physiotherapist put the ball to clinical use (hence the alternative name Swiss Ball). By the early nineties, progressive American coaches were using the ball as a conditioning tool for elite athletes. Trendy gyms took over from there.

The ball is the most popular way to engage in active sitting, but there

are less challenging options. You can buy a frame with legs to keep the ball in place, or an inflated sitting disc to put on your regular old chair seat. And for those who insist on conspicuousness, \$769.95 will get you a German-designed "Swopper," a mobile stool available in six vibrant colours plus black leather.

Stability balls are already at use in special needs classrooms for children with attention deficit disorder. With her Wisconsin-based company, Witt Fitt, Lisa Witt hopes to make balls commonplace in schools. After conducting an informal field study in her former Colorado Grade 6 class, and reading up on research from Europe, she now wants to see every kid positioned ergonomically soundly. Not only does blood flow improve, aiding concentration, but the ball works as an escape valve for fidgets. Witt Fitt business is expanding, including inquiries from Canadian principals. "Most teachers wouldn't believe you, but the ball is wonderful," Witt attests. Witt Fitt balls come with little prongs so they stay put

when not in use.

Multidisciplinary designer Jason Halter first started using the ball at his desk several years ago when there were six or so floating around the Bruce Mau Design studio in Toronto where he then worked. Now a principle of Wonder Inc., Halter has one for the office and one for home. He appreciates the way the ball abets his "conscientious but lazy" nature, forcing him into a posture boost. He also likes the way the ball stops just that bit short of relaxing. "You don't slink back into your chair and become one with your monitor," he says. "It reminds you to get up, move around and drink eight glasses of water a day."

"The only person I've seen have a bad experience with the ball is the nerdy Dwight character on the TV show *The Office*," says Clapp's co-author, Sarah Robichaud, "because Jim stole his ball and punctured it! My clients tell me they love working on the ball. I mean, why not multitask your way to core strength?"

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