

Nancy has just paid for ten sessions with you, and she wants to flatten her tummy—now! She has never been much for exercise and has never even seen a stability ball. But she has been told that she needs to work her core, and she is eager to learn.

This may sound like a familiar scenario to you—a client with lots of energy and motivation but not very much exercise expertise. She may be new to fitness but that does not mean that she should shy away from core training. Even novice exercisers can do breathing exercises and activate their core muscles.

Linda Winterton, owner and program director of West Coast Pilates and Health in North Vancouver, follows these steps with her new clients:

1. does a postural assessment
2. teaches them how to contract the pelvic floor
3. teaches them about abdominal muscles and functionality
4. teaches them lateral costal breathing (expanding the back and sides of the ribcage)
5. provides a general orientation to the ball

EDUCATION AND AWARENESS

When Nancy joined the gym, she didn't know her transverse abdominus (TA) from her gluteus maximus. It is important that your novices understand the muscles they are targeting and engaging.

In the case of core workouts on the ball, the TA and multifidus (MF) are stabilizing and co-contracting continuously, and your clients need to understand this. If they are not engaging these core stabilizers prior to beginning each exercise, the workout will be futile and possibly contraindicated. Novices do not have the kinesthetic awareness and postural self-cueing to know which muscles they are activating or how to assess their progress. Begin with deep breathing exercises to help your clients locate their TA and MF (A breathing exercise is described on the next page.)

BALL ORIENTATION

Nancy approaches the ball, attempts to sit on it and goes tumbling down. Not a great start to your session.

As trainers, we often forget there are people who have never used a stability ball. We need to discuss ball size (the height of your client changes the size of ball you need), stiffness (novices need a softer ball) and control.



HAVE A BALL!

Core Training for the Novice Client by NICOLE PALACIOS

Tell your clients why you are using the ball, it will help improve their balance and in turn their agility. It also forces them to use their core muscles and strengthens postural muscles that may be weak due to a sedentary work environment or lifestyle.

POSTURAL AWARENESS

Once your clients feel secure on the ball, postural awareness becomes crucial. Mirrors are great tools for the novice.

Use cues such as, “Imagine you have a belt around your waist. Take a deep breath and inhale. As you exhale, cinch the belt as tightly as you can around your abdomen.”

When supine, another cue such as, “Imagine there is cement dripping all over your abdomen, gluing you to the floor. You cannot move your torso at all,” can be very useful.

Winterton uses visualization regularly in her beginners' classes. When supine, she tells her clients to imagine they are spreading pancake batter from hip to hip over their abdomens, which helps them cognitively to connect their core muscles to the action of contracting. With a cue like this, the client is able to better focus on the surface area that they need to contract – from hip to hip and over the entire abdomen.

She also uses corsets and martinis in her cues. “Lace up your ribcage with shoelaces,” “cinch a corset” and “balance a full martini on each hip” are some of the cues that she uses to help her clients master each exercise. For example, when the client is in a bridge position, on the floor or on the ball, the hips should be on an even plane. By balancing imaginary martinis on each hip, the client is prevented from tilting out of the proper position.

Let clients know that when they are lying supine on the ball, such as in a crunch position, the exercise will be easier if their bums are closer to the floor.

In a plank position, the exercise will be easier when the hips are closer to the ball. Be sure they're in control and strong enough before they walk their hands out further.

Do not hesitate to use a “hands on” approach once you have verbal consent from your clients. Gently poke your fingers into their abdomens to make sure the TA is compressing. Use your hands to pull them up if their spines are drooping. This is difficult for beginners since their TA and MF can be very weak; they can lose their neutral spine if they do not conscientiously focus on maintaining proper positioning.

EXERCISES

Before beginning each exercise, take a deep breath in and, as you exhale, activate your core by pulling your belly button to your spine. This involves co-contraction of the transverse abdominus and multifidus and will help your clients find a neutral spine position.

BREATHING: Sit on the ball with knees bent and arms by your sides. Knees and hips should be at 90 degrees. Take a deep breath in, then exhale and activate your TA by pulling your belly button to your spine. Hold the position for 10 seconds, then release. Repeat as many times as necessary. Cue: Sit tall as if your spine is glued to a 2X4.

BRIDGING: Lie supine on the ball with head and shoulders on the ball and knees bent. Engage the core and lift your buttocks up slowly until your hips are parallel to the floor. Keep the ball steady. Hold this position, or add a slow lift and lower. Cue: Imagine a string pulling your hips up towards the ceiling, while an opposite force presses your belly button into your spine.



PLANK: Roll out in a prone position keeping your thighs on the ball and your arms in a push up position. Engage the core once you are in your plank position. Hold this position until fatigued, then repeat. If this is too easy, add a small hip lift, no more than 30 degrees. Cue: Lace up a tight corset around your rib cage as you pull in your belly button.



SUPERMAN: Lie prone on the ball, with feet on floor and lower back over the centre of the ball. Arms long by your sides, head and neck in alignment with the spine. Look directly in front of you and lift up slowly and extend your spine. Hold this position for 3 to 5 seconds, then release down slowly. Cue: Keep your spine long; lift your head, neck and spine as one unit. FTC

Nicole Palacios, B.Sc. is a BCRPA and ACE certified personal trainer. She is the creator of Stroller Fitt and trains in North Vancouver, B.C. She can be reached at www.perfectfit.ws