



back on the ball

this simple 5-step solution will free you from back pain

BY PJ O'CLAIR

If you're reading this article, chances are you are one of the 80 percent of the population that has experienced low-back pain—or will at some point. Back pain is the second most common reason for visits to the doctor, surpassed only by upper-respiratory conditions.

The good news is that Pilates gives us the tools we need to maintain a healthy back—one that is strong, flexible and pain-free. In fact, Joe Pilates believed a person is only as old as his or her spine.

The following exercise program came about from my own back problems. I had a

series of accidents, and by age 25 had lost control of my right leg due to the repeated spinal injuries. Eventually I had spinal surgery to fix the problem, and it did eradicate most of the pain. But much to my dismay, I wasn't fixed. My back would consistently "go out"—a term well known to everyone suffering with back issues. I was frustrated and wanted to resume my previously active lifestyle. It took a great deal of patience, research and years of trial and error to find what works and why.

So what did I learn? It's actually quite simple: The

key to a healthy back is building a strong foundation and regaining perfect posture. Perfect posture allows you to manage the daily stresses of gravity with little effort.

Gravity, the force that keeps us firmly planted on the ground, can wreak havoc on our structure if we don't manage it well. It works to our advantage when the spine is in its most neutral position, meaning when all the curves of the spine are aligned. When the alignment is off, gravity puts pressure on the spine and all its supporting structures, creating weakness and potential damage.

Think of a stack of soup cans stacked up against the wall. If one can happens to be forward of the rest, the structure loses its integrity. This is exactly what happens to your spine when it's not stacked up properly. Now imagine yourself running or lifting heavy items with a lack of integrity, and it's understandable how we can easily become injured or stressed with basic daily functions.

To maintain that integrity, you need the strength of all your support muscles to provide you with the endurance necessary for everyday life. Consider these five exercises as your foundation, your support system. When you do them faithfully—they're simple and require very little time—you will regain the strength, endurance and agility needed to maintain that perfect posture and take control of your life.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ARTIST: JEFFREY D. HARRIS; STYLING BY JESSICA WILSON

PJ O'Clair has been a leader and consultant in the fitness industry for more than 25 years. She is a Stott®-certified Master Trainer and her newest workout, 'The Secret to a Strong Back,' will be available on DVD by early fall 2007 (stottpilates.com). For more information, go to northeastpilates.com.



cat stretch

Essence: A nice way to release tension and mobilize the entire spine from top to bottom while increasing awareness of the abdominals.

- 1 Kneel with the stability ball in front of you, hands resting on top of the ball.
- 2 Inhale to prepare. Exhale and drop your chin to begin rolling the spine forward as you roll the ball out in front of you.
- 3 Inhale and extend the spine into a long line, keeping the abs engaged and the lower back stable. Exhale to roll all the way back up to the start position. Perform 3 to 5 reps.

ab prep

Essence: Strengthens the abs without putting pressure on the spine; core strength is very important in low-back care.

1 Lie on your back with your knees bent, both calves resting on top of the stability ball. Allow the lower spine to have its normal curve. Place your hands behind your head.

2 Inhale to nod your head. Exhale and use your abs to curl your upper body off the mat. Avoid pressing the lower back into the floor.

3 Inhale and maintain the lifted position, expanding the rib cage with the breath. Exhale to lower the head and shoulders back to the mat. Perform 5 to 10 reps.

advanced: When you're in your curl, intensify the ab work by pulsing forward 10 times.

tip: Use your abdominals—not your buttocks—to lift you up. Activating the buttocks forces the lower spine into the mat, causing compression of the spinal discs. This may create pain or discomfort and exacerbate a spinal injury.



adductor press/ hip lift combo

Essence: Strengthens the adductor (inner thigh) muscles, which assist in supporting the entire core and pelvic floor muscles.

1 Lying on your back with both legs straight, press your calves into either side of the top of the ball, hands resting by your sides.

2 Inhale to prepare. Exhale and gently activate your inner thigh muscles to squeeze the ball with your legs, keeping your legs long. Inhale to release. Perform 5 reps.

advanced: Exhale and activate your inner thighs and glutes to lift your hips to a low hover, keeping legs long. Hold the position for the inhale, and lower hips on the exhale. Repeat 10 times.

tip: Activate the inner thighs to press gently into the ball, but don't squeeze too hard or you'll create unnecessary tension in the lower back.



breast stroke

Essence: Strengthens the upper spinal extensor muscles—great for people who sit all day.

1 Lie over the ball, face down with legs hip-distance apart, knees bent and toes touching the floor. Keep your arms long and reaching toward the floor.

2 Inhale to prepare. Exhale and engage the entire back side of your body to bring you into a Plank position, one long line from your head to your toes. Repeat 10 times.

advanced: Place the backs of your hands against your forehead, elbows out to the sides, when doing the move.

Tip: Think of your body as a long dart; do not come up so high that you arch the spine.



spine stretch forward

Essence: Releases tension in the spine and strengthens the postural muscles. A nice cooldown after doing the other four exercises.

1 Sit upright on the ball with feet on the ground, hip-distance apart. Arms are relaxed and down by your sides.

2 Inhale to prepare. Exhale and roll the spine forward one vertebra at a time, starting with the head, as far as you can while maintaining stability. Inhale to stay and expand the entire rib cage. Exhale to roll the spine upright using the abs and spinal muscles. Repeat 5 times.

advanced: Intensify this move by doing it in two breaths—exhale to roll down, inhale to roll up.

tip: Don't collapse the body when rolled forward—keep using those abs like a corset for support.