

Keeping exercise balls safe.

Fitness equipment is designed to improve a user's health and fitness. However, all fitness equipment carries a risk of causing injuries, especially when that equipment is damaged.

Exercise balls (also called stability, swiss, medi or fitballs) are a common sight in many gyms and personal training studios. They're a versatile exercise tool for helping people improve their balance, strength, flexibility and endurance. However, exercise balls are also easily damaged, posing a real risk of injury to the people using them.

Prevention really is better than cure. The below scenarios show how exercise balls can be damaged and potentially cause injuries.

Scenario 1

A young man was holding a 10kg dumbbell in each hand and had just sat down on an exercise ball to perform a seated shoulder press, when it suddenly started deflating underneath him due to a tear. He was

startled and thrown off-balance. As a result, he landed heavily on one of the dumbbells, injuring his back.

Scenario 2

A personal training studio found they were spending hundreds of dollars replacing exercise balls. They examined their usual practices and realised the balls were being stored next to a window. The heat from sunlight was shortening their lifespan. The studio therefore re-arranged the floor space to store their exercise balls away from heat and light.

Safety tips

> Firstly, make sure you purchase the right type of ball for your environment. There's a range of products on the market, some more appropriate for home use than constant gym use. The quality and durability of the ball needs to match the way you are going to use it in your gym or studio.

- > Inflate balls according to manufacturer's instructions. This is important as some need to be slowly inflated over a few days instead of all in one go. Use a measuring tape for accurate inflation, taking care not to over-inflate.
- > Store exercise balls at room temperature, away from direct sunlight and other sources of heat. Prolonged sunlight and heat weakens the material, shortening their lifespan.
- > Make sure there's a suitable area for people to use exercise balls. Keep them away from sharp edges of other equipment, or objects that may cause damage. This also helps to keep people safe from being injured on other equipment if they happen to fall off the ball.
- > Check that the floor surface you intend to use the ball on is consistent with the manufacturer's instructions. Seek advice if unsure.

- > Likewise, follow the manufacturer's instructions about where to use the ball. Some specifically recommend to not use them outdoors as they may be punctured or damaged on rough surfaces.
- > Make sure all equipment is only used for its intended purpose. Avoid using exercise balls for physical activities involving kicking, hitting or throwing. This may cause damage that's not immediately visible, but still increases the chance of breakage.
- > Encourage people to avoid wearing or carrying sharp objects such as jewellery or keys in their pockets while using the balls as these could cause damage.
- > Establish a regular routine of checking exercise balls for marks, scratches or other damage. Regular inspections will help you to identify and correct any safety issues before someone is injured.
- > If you do find a scratch or damage, don't try to repair it. Take the ball off the gym floor as it's no longer safe to use. It might be safer to replace the ball than try to prolong its lifespan with temporary measures which may increase the risk of injury.
- > Clean all equipment according to the manufacturer's instructions. Some chemicals may damage the ball over time, causing it to break.
- > Make sure you know if it's safe for your gym members and personal training clients to use exercise balls and instruct them appropriately. For example, it may not be safe for someone with balance problems or other medical conditions to use exercise balls. As with any exercise equipment selection, use appropriate screening, guidance and supervision. And always keep up-to-date with industry guidelines.



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