

Mary Essert, B.A., ATRIC

## Exercise For Your Body, Mind, And Spirit

Much has been written about the benefits of exercise for fibromyalgia (FM). However, it is good to remember that exercise alone is just one part of a larger formula for improved health. It is also important to consider ourselves in a wholistic and holy fashion as well, for when we can experience the connection between our physical bodies and that unseen part which some call spirit, then we can better prepare for balance in our lives. We can also feel whole and confident to hold up our heads and proceed with life.

What does this mean to those of us who have been cooped up and cold this winter? Individuals with fibromyalgia tend to avoid cold whenever possible because of tension and pain. Now that spring is approaching, how can we get ready to be outdoors—to walk or to garden?

If I practice prayer or meditation as I breathe and move, not only will my physical self improve, but the well-being of my heart and mind will also be enhanced. In Step One, I may mindfully sit tall in a straight chair—feet on the floor. Step Two might find me lying flat on a carpet or bed (bent knees). Step Three might find me sitting on an exercise ball. Step Four might involve walking inside or outside for five minutes (progressively building up over time). The excuse, “I haven’t time,” is no longer acceptable.

Remember, no one can do breathing and posture work for us. That is our *own* challenge. The moment when I can move with comfort is what I’m working toward.

Many of you realize that I am an aquatic person, so I usually suggest a warm pool as my #1 choice for exercise. Unfortunately, many of us do not have that option. In that light, the article which follows is designed to provide some simple tools which will help you prepare yourself for exercise whether you are planning to do pool work, outdoor exercise, or conditioning work at the gym.

**Special thanks to Laura Daniels, PTA, Conway Therapy Services, for her inspiration, and to Nancy A. Good, P.T., for her assistance in reviewing this article.**

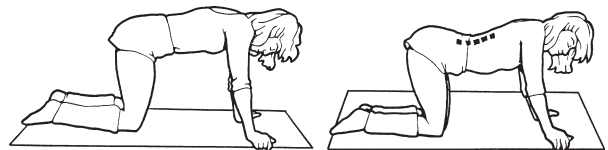


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### Home-Based Exercises

Trunk stability is the basis for ability to move effectively and without pain. We work on trunk stability by first understanding breathing and posture. The key is to achieve a neutral spine position while standing so that we may then move effectively in proper alignment.

How do you achieve a neutral spine position? Practice this by doing pelvic work--specifically a posterior (forward) pelvic tilt and then an anterior (backward) pelvic tilt. While standing in a good posture, find your hip bones. Tilt them forward, then backward. Your goal is to find a neutral spine position somewhere between the two. There should be stability with no pain.



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#### An Anterior Pelvic Tilt Performed On A Floor Mat

Abdominal breathing is effective before, during, and after this movement. Breath work may be checked by placing one hand on the abdomen while inhaling to determine if your abdomen expands as you breath in. Exhale, and you should return to normal size. This is a learned pattern which will serve you well in activity, relaxation and pain reduction.

## Hints to the Wise

Listen to your body; you know it best. Pain is a signal to adapt, cut back, or stop. A good rule of thumb when starting out is to move through "almost pain." Try to work up to a half hour of movement 4-5 days per week. This may be divided into 10 or 15 minute segments if desired.

Stretch warm muscles after you warm up and at the end of your workout. Practice risk management re: safe equipment and environment. Be warm; layer clothing for comfort.

Activities of daily living are the meat and potatoes of our life and a main reason for maintaining and improving functional movement. We want to continue to do those things which make our lives meaningful. Independence is important, and we try to "keep on keeping on."

We can accommodate function by being mindful in our everyday movements. When we put laundry in and out of the machines, it is wise to think about our posture and use our leg muscles when lifting. It is also useful to think of our forearms as short levers which may only be used for lifting proximally (close to the body).

Creative home exercise can include putting on a favorite CD and moving actively and freely as we go about our domestic routine. We might waltz with a dust mop, boogie with a broom, glide across the floor like Fred Astaire, or do high/low reaches with a duster. If you are shy about such things, remember that no one is watching your "foolishness," and it is okay to have fun and "get your blood moving."

Further suggestions for free or low cost exercise include the following. Starter strengthening can begin with two one-pound soup cans. Sit upright in a straight chair with your feet on the floor and neutral spine and do bicep curls, tricep curls, flyes, and deltoid ab/adduction (see Table 1). Try several sets of 3-5 repetitions. Check your posture and breathing pattern often.

My own brand of FM tells me to do strengthening wisely and moderately and then get right into warm water. This can be a shower or bath if a pool or spa is not available. Also, when there is discomfort, try alternating cold and hot compresses if one or the other is not successful alone. In general, cold reduces edema, and hot increases circulation.

## Therapy Ball Exercises

One tool for the enhancement of posture and trunk stability is the exercise ball (also sometimes called a "Swedish ball"). If you can manage to invest a bit, purchase an exercise ball for approximately \$20 and follow the exercises described on the following pages as you are comfortable. An exercise ball can serve you well in a variety of ways. My husband uses our ball as a desk chair, a great multi-purpose tool. Posture-wise, the correct seated position encourages a neutral spine and appropriate pelvic position. Use of the ball promotes trunk stability and core strength. It also offers varied opportunities for exercise progression.

It is helpful to begin work with an emphasis on mobility, flexibility, and stability. If body work (i.e., therapeutic massage) is accessible early on, that is useful as well. As you become conditioned, you can advance to more emphasis on stability, endurance, balance, coordination and strengthening activities, also practicing specific skills such as those which replicate activities of daily living.

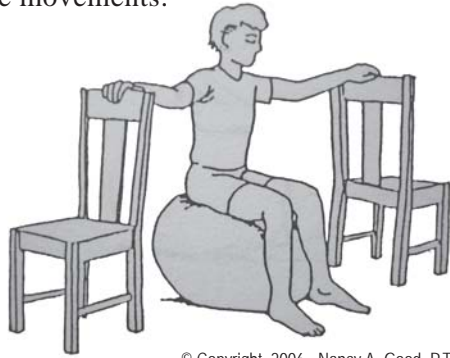
Your goal is to achieve natural, automatic, and economical movement. This is the goal of all functional kinetics. Exercise should be done without pain and should not increase symptoms. Strength is not emphasized in this program

**Equipment:** Choose a therapy ball of a size which allows you to sit upright on the ball with your feet on the floor and your knees at 90°. A ball which can be inflated to 65 cm. is adaptable for most adults. Always use an exercise ball on a stable surface, and be sure to keep it away from heat/flames as well as sharp objects, including belt buckles, jewelry, and kitty cats.

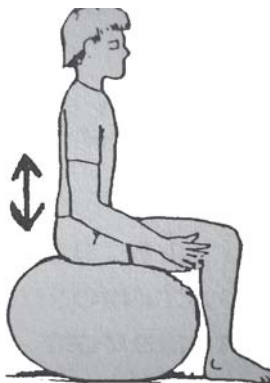
**Attire:** Bare feet, comfortable clothing. Avoid zippered garments and loose, long hair.

**Contraindications:** Always check with your physician before starting a new exercise program. Stop exercising if you experience cardiac distress (i.e., shortness of breath, light-headedness, pallor, nausea, angina) or a marked increase in pain or muscular fatigue. Signs of sensory overload include pupil dilation, sweaty palms, changes in respiration rate, flushing or pallor, ringing in the ears, and complaints of dizziness. In addition, if you are STD (scared to death), and ball activities frighten you, try a smaller ball and use less threatening positions.

**Tips:** For your own safety, recruit a helper to watch as you begin to exercise. Don't overdo; work to tolerance. To increase your confidence, place your feet firmly on the floor and do therapy ball exercises between parallel bars or holding onto one or two chairs (see example below). Warm up prior to doing stretching exercises by performing range of motion exercises. These same exercises can be repeated as you cool down. Always move easily; never force movements.



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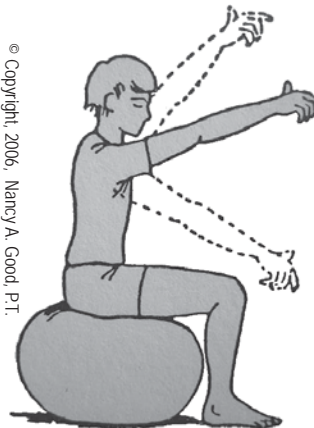
**Sitting on ball:** Feet flat on floor, hip/knee flexion approximately 90°

Body erect and centrally positioned on ball

Try controlled bouncing. Push off from your feet using your quad muscles (front of thighs) to accelerate the movement of body weight.

**Purpose:** To stabilize the spine, provide nutrition to the discs, train automatic vertical posture, build trunk endurance, work on gait preparation, and strengthen quad and calf muscles.

**Progressions:** Add vertical arm movements, alternately, then together (see example at right). Add shoulder shrugs, and then try heel lifts. Bouncing can be an aerobic activity. To try this, increase your frequency, intensity, and time (FIT).



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**Hula:** Forward, backward. Keep your feet on the floor, but pull the ball forward. Your knees and hips should also move forward. Now push the ball backward using your feet; your hips and knees also move backward. This exercise promotes mobilization, stabilization, and preparation for walking.

**Hula Circle:** Hula side-to-side and forward/backward in combination to roll ball in a circle, both directions

**Balanced sitting:** While holding on to a chair, lift your feet from the floor to balance. Try also leg lifts, alternately, then together as tolerated.

### Upper Extremity Range Of Motion And Stretches

**Head turn:** While sitting on the ball with your feet on the floor, look over one shoulder, then back to center, then over the other shoulder slowly. Hold 10-30 seconds at each location.

**Retract chin:** While still sitting on the ball with your feet on the floor, look straight ahead. Gently pull chin back to align your spine.

**Prayer position:** Press hands together as you contract abdominal and gluteal (buttock) muscles.

**Shoulder stretch:** With your arms bent and at your sides, gently pull your elbows back toward the center of your back (scapular retraction). Then, move arms forward again, and stretch them out in front of your body (scapular protraction). Repeat.

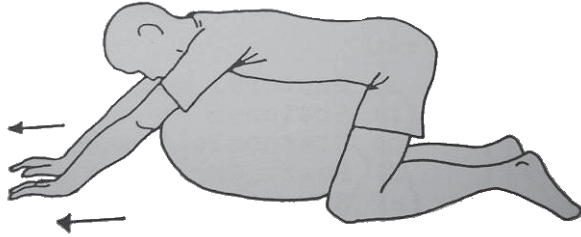
**Crossover shoulder stretch:** Sitting on the ball with your feet on the floor, reach one arm across your midline and support it with your other hand. Stretch toward the fingers of extended arm.

**Stretch to the sky:** Extend one arm toward the sky; hold for 10 seconds, and change sides.

**Hug:** Hands around your shoulders, change sides. Leaning forward will use paraspinal muscles. Leaning backward will use the abdominal muscles.

**Kneeling on the floor facing the ball:** Kneel on the floor with your knees and upper calves in contact

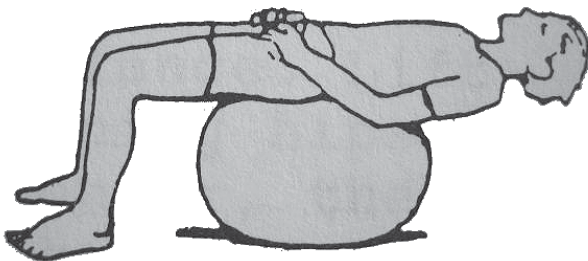
with the floor and your abdomen extended horizontally over the ball. Keep your arms and hands shoulder width apart and on either side of the ball. Your chin should rest downward on the ball in a neutral position. Using your arms, push the ball forward and then back.



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### Advanced balance exercises

As you develop confidence and strength on the ball, you may be able to proceed to more advanced balance and strengthening exercises. Consult your physician or physical therapist before attempting these exercises if you have neck or back problems.



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**Mary B. Essert, B.A., ATRIC** has been involved internationally in presenting and teaching swimming, safety, water fitness, and therapeutic intervention techniques since 1949. She is currently employed by Conway Regional Health Systems and Conway Therapy Services (Conway, AR). Her focus on breast cancer and fibromyalgia results from personal experience. She serves as a trainer for the Arthritis Foundation and Red Cross WSI and holds many instructor certifications from organizations including AEA, USWFA, Medical Health & Fitness Cancer Wel-Fit, and the MS Society. She is also an assistant teacher for Watsu® and a Jahara practitioner.

Her books and videos, including several on FM and breast cancer, are available at [www.maryessert.com](http://www.maryessert.com). Her newest work, arriving Spring, 2006, is an interactive multimedia CD-ROM (a four-hour cec course) entitled, *Breast Cancer Recovery Land and Water*. It is co-authored with Naomi Aaronson, M.A., OTR/L and produced by Fitness Learning Systems (FLS). Cost: \$59.95 plus postage/handling.

### For More Information

*Dynamic Stabilization And Other Uses Of Therapy Balls*, by Nancy A. Good, P.T. (August 1994).

*Therapeutic Balls: A New Generation Of Treatment Applications And Therapy Progressions*, by Nancy A. Good, P.T. (May 2005).

*Spiritual Exercise*, by Nancy Roth (Seabury Press, 2005).

*Active Stretch & Relaxation*, by Pauline Ivens, M.S. (AKWA Apr/May 2004 and Workshop).

*Bounce Back Into Shape After Baby*, by C. Creager, Executive Physical Therapy, Inc. (Berthoud, Colorado, September 2002).

*Body & Soul* magazine. "Relax, Go With The Flow," by Frances Lefkowitz (July/August 2005).

"One way to still the mind is to move the body. The harder you dance, the deeper you breathe. The deeper you breathe, the deeper you live. Breath, body, beat, bliss—they go together." —Dancer/Author Gabrielle Roth

## Where To Purchase Exercise Balls

### Gymnastik: Good & Assoc.

Address: P.O. Box 607, Aurora, OR 97002

Phone: (877) 706-4322

A variety of excellent books on the subject are also available.

### Resist a Ball: Power System

Website: [www.power-systems.com](http://www.power-systems.com)

### Danskin Core-Balls

Website: [www.danskin.com/equipment-core.html](http://www.danskin.com/equipment-core.html)

### Banner Therapy Products

Website: [www.bannertherapy.com](http://www.bannertherapy.com).

Address: 891 Broadway Street, Asheville, NC 28804

Phone: (888) 277-1188 (toll-free)

[A print catalog is also available]

Exercise balls are also available at WalMart and many other stores featuring exercise equipment.

**TABLE 1: How To Do...**

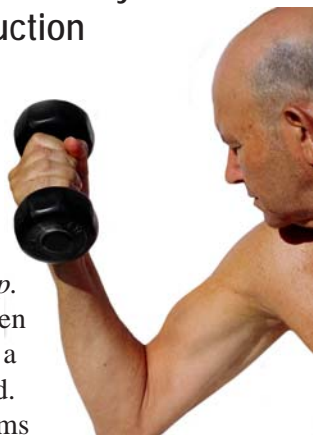
**Bicep Curls, Tricep Curls, Flyes,  
And Deltoid Ab/Adduction**

**Bicep Curls**

In a seated position with feet on the floor and bent elbows close to sides, turn palms so they are facing *up*. Either keep your palms open or hold a 1 lb. soup can or a 1-2 lb. weight in each hand. Slowly bring hands/forearms up toward shoulders, flexing bicep muscles. Then, slowly extend arms back to starting position.

**Tricep Curls**

In a seated position with feet on the floor and bent elbows close to sides, hands at hip level, turn palms so they are facing *down*. Either keep your palms open or



hold a 1-lb. soup can or a 1-2 lb. weight in each hand. Slowly bring palms/forearms up toward shoulders, flexing tricep muscles. Then, slowly extend arms back to starting position.

**Flyes**

In a seated position with feet on the floor and bent elbows close to sides, bring forearms up so that your hands are pointed toward the sky. Next, bring arms together (elbows, forearms) in front of your body. Then spread them back apart, then back together again. Repeat to tolerance.

**Deltoid Abduction/Adduction**

In a seated position with feet on the floor and arms hanging at sides, bring straight arms from near body to full extension at your sides. Try doing this first with palms facing up. Then facing down. Palms may be open, or you might opt to hold a soup can or weight in each hand. Repeat to tolerance.