

Using a Birthing Ball during Pregnancy and for Labour

If you wish to use a birthing ball to help to ease labour pain, it is important that you read this leaflet

This leaflet can be made available
in alternative languages / formats on request.

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Na żądanie ta ulotka może zostać udostępniona
w innych językach/formatkach.

What are the benefits of using a birthing ball?

A birthing ball can help ease labour pain, reduce the pain of contractions (especially if you use it for a couple of months before you give birth), decrease anxiety and shorten the first stage of labour.

Using a birthing ball can also help you adopt different upright positions, which can help you to labour effectively. It may even shorten your labour by an hour or so.

What is the difference between a birthing ball and a gym ball?

Birthing balls and gym balls are basically the same thing, both can be made from anti-burst materials. This means they deflate slowly rather than with a bang if punctured. Make sure your ball is anti-burst, but keep sharp objects away from it, just in case. Don't store it on rough surfaces or near heat like radiators, stoves and open fires.

Some birthing balls have a non-slip finish, which helps them to grip the floor. Most are latex-free and made of PVC but if you have a latex allergy, it's worth making sure.

Always check the small print when you buy a ball. This is particularly true if you are ordering a gym ball rather than a birthing ball. What you need is a ball that's 65cm (26in) or 75cm (30in) in height when inflated. Some gym balls come up much smaller than you expect when you get them home.

What size birthing ball is right for me?

Your height will give a guide to the size of ball that will be right for you. Ideally, your knees should be about 10cm (4in) lower than your hips when you sit on it. As a general rule:

- If you're up to 1.73m (5ft 8in) in height, it's best to get a 65cm ball
- If you're taller than 1.73m (5ft 8in) then it's best to get a 75cm ball

A birthing ball will take your weight, whatever your size. Good quality birthing and gym balls are pressure-tested to support weights up to 300kg (about 47st).

As well as traditional round birthing balls, you can also buy peanut-shaped balls.

These only roll one way rather than in all directions. They can be useful if you don't feel secure sitting on a ball. These tend to be a little smaller and can help you get into squatting positions for labour.

You may need to buy a pump, as many balls don't come with one. Inflate your ball so that it is firm, but gives a little when you press on it. If the ball is too soft then it may not be as effective so do try to get the right size for you

You could use a pencil to make a mark on a door frame or wall so that you inflate it to the exact height that is right for you. For example, if you are less than 1.63m (5ft 4in), you may find it more comfortable to inflate a 65cm (26in) ball to 60cm (24in) in height.

Balls tend to lose some air over time. You may need to top yours up to keep it at the correct height for sitting comfortably, with your knees below your hips. Do not over inflate your ball as you may find it hard to use correctly.

What if I am using a birthing ball for the first time?

Place your ball on a carpet rather than a smooth floor. This will make it more stable. When you first sit on your birthing ball, it is best to have someone with you to support the ball from behind you (especially in the later stages of pregnancy). This will give you a chance to get used to staying balanced on it. Make sure you are wearing non-slip shoes or socks. Better still, go barefoot.

Place your feet flat on the floor, about 60cm (24in) apart, so you have got a good balance. Now place one hand on the ball and lower yourself to sit on it.

Once you are comfortable, place your hands on your knees and try rocking your pelvis from side to side or back to front. Then, if you feel secure, have a little bounce!

If you feel too unsteady to rock or bounce on your own, hold on to whoever is with you. Alternatively, put a chair in front of you, facing away from you, and hold on to the back of it for support.

How can I use my birthing ball during pregnancy?

Exercising on a birthing ball in pregnancy can help to reduce any back pain you are experiencing and make it easier for you to move around .

If you are going to use your ball for [exercise](#), make sure you have a clear area around you. Exercise in a slow and controlled way. Breathe normally and stop if you feel any dizziness, pain or discomfort .

Sit comfortably while you're working or relaxing

You may find your ball much more comfortable, and easier to get on and off, than a hard chair or soft sofa.

Also, sitting on a birthing ball gives you a mini-workout. As you rock or bounce on it gently, your tummy and back muscles will be working hard to keep you upright.

If you are interested in using a gym ball during your pregnancy, please contact the pelvic health physiotherapist team on 0151 430 1878 or ask your midwife to refer you.

How can I use my birthing ball during labour?

It's best to practice using the ball before you go into labour so you feel comfortable and safe using it.

You may find you instinctively sway and rock in rhythm with your contractions and a birthing ball gives great support for this.

Ways to use your birth ball during labour include:

Sitting astride the ball and rocking your pelvis from side to side or back and forth



Sitting astride the ball and rocking your pelvis from side to side or back and forth



Leaning on your birthing ball from a kneeling position on the floor



Get into a hands and knees position by hugging your birthing ball and lifting your bottom up from a kneeling position. You can then rock your pelvis from side to side



Lean over your ball from a standing position, with the ball on the bed or another surface

All these techniques can be used during first stage of labour.



These positions also give your birth partner plenty of room to support you, massage you or apply pressure to your lower back during contractions




During the pushing stage you will want to avoid sitting, so use the leaning or hands-and-knees positions. They will take the pressure off your bottom and give your baby lots of room to descend with each contraction and to be born.

At St Helens and Knowsley Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust we do have a limited supply of birthing balls on Delivery Suite and Ward 2E. If you are particularly attached to your own birthing ball, take it along with you. You can clean it afterwards using warm soapy water.

Please take extra care

If there is a leak of fluid (particularly when your waters break) the area can become a slip hazard. Your midwife will help to make the area safe. If the ball and the surrounding area has become a slip hazard please refrain from sitting on the ball until the area has been made safe.



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