



STATE OF WISCONSIN
DEPARTMENT OF ADMINISTRATION

Tony Evers, Governor
Kathy Blumenfeld, Secretary-designee
Jana Steinmetz, Administrator

Date: October 12, 2022
To: Administrative Officers Council
Agency Risk Management and Safety Contacts
From: Jason Gates, Director of State Risk Management
Subject: Use of fitness balls and other exercise equipment in the office

Fitness balls and other exercise equipment continue to be marketed by suppliers as an alternate to office chairs to eliminate the development of low back pain and promote physical activity. Exercise equipment includes devices such as, but not limited to workstation ellipticals, stationary bike or pedal units and workstation treadmills. With few exceptions, research overwhelmingly shows that an adjustable chair and desk, combined with best practices of alternated sitting/standing, breaks and stretching are safer options than a ball or other exercise equipment for prolonged home or onsite office work.

Concerns with fitness balls and other exercise equipment:

- Constant low-level muscle activation can lead to the development of muscle fatigue which may result in improper awkward postures (i.e. slumped back posture, spread legs for support, leaning on support surface to balance) which may enhance strain on the low back and spine & contributes to enhanced fluid loss from the intervertebral discs due to higher forces on the spine, enhancing stiffness.
- Not designed for prolonged sitting. Studies show reports of increased discomfort compared to an office chair. Office chair seat pans are designed to distribute the weight away from the softer tissues and load under your sitting bones which have greater pressure thresholds.
- Enhanced spinal shrinkage has been observed due to greater muscle and spine loading which enhances compression. Higher compression increases stiffness and prevents nutrients/blood flow (major contributing factor to low back pain).
- Room for error and injury trying to multitask on work activities, while exercising.
- Determining training needed for proper use of each piece of equipment, coinciding with any safety precautions outlined in the standard equipment manual and who will be performing any potential maintenance needed.
- Proper stretching and what is considered a “reasonable amount” of time, or at all, to be exercising for each specific person may be very difficult to manage based on each individual unique need and/or possible limitations. Additionally, the balance and stability skill levels are also very different for each person that could lead to an unnecessary workplace injury.
- The quality of equipment is unknown on employee purchases and the potential to invite others of bringing in similar equipment to onsite office may become difficult to manage.
- Some equipment utilizes electricity and current onsite office workstation setups may not be designed to accommodate certain equipment electrical needs. Which may lead to overloading of circuits and/or potential fire hazards.

Other factors to consider with fitness balls and other exercise equipment:

- Are not easily height adjustable (key component of ergonomics).
- Are not very stable.
- Will roll away when not seated.
- Are not very mobile when seated.
- Do not have armrests or a backrest.

- May be a tripping hazard.
- Regular maintenance of equipment is required.
- Potential noise concerns or disruptions to coworkers.
- Proper cleaning and sanitation of equipment in onsite office.
- Onsite office janitorial staff are not responsible for cleaning equipment and have challenges cleaning around equipment.
- Facilities [DOA Tenant Manual](#) prohibits exercise equipment outside of wellness rooms without building management approval.

In summary, fitness balls and other equipment can be great for exercising but research does not support use for prolonged use at a home or onsite workstation. In fact, if used improperly fitness balls and other equipment can potentially cause further unintended musculoskeletal problems or injury. Fitness balls and other exercise equipment shall be strongly discouraged unless prescribed by a doctor. If prescribed, the doctor shall be contacted to determine if an alternative ergonomic chair and/or adjustable desk can be purchased. Investing in an adjustable ergonomic chair and/or desk for state employees will ultimately provide less risk to workers compensation claims and be an overall safer alternative. Encouraging the use of varied work patterns through sit-to-stand transitions & stretching as a best practice to organize the workday, provides an overall encouraged ergonomic workplace. Additionally, the state has approved and designated numerous onsite wellness/exercise rooms to provide convenient options for physical activity and well-being outside of work hours. Please call me with any questions or concerns.

Additional Workstation Ergonomic Guidance:

https://doa.wi.gov/Pages/AboutDOA/DEO_Safety-and-Loss-Control.aspx

<http://ergo.human.cornell.edu/CUESitStandPrograms.html>

<https://www.landrumhr.com/resources-en/newsletters/risk-management/ergonomics-an-exercise-ball-is-not-a-desk-chair>

<https://www.cnet.com/health/sprains-strains-and-injured-veins-when-not-to-use-a-theragun/>

CC: Agency Risk Management Contacts