Dear Alice,

What are the health benefits of exercising with medicine balls? What are some easy exercises if I'm new to this type of fitness?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Medicine ball training is a great supplement to regular exercise! Whether you’re trying to incorporate strength training into your exercise routine or you’re looking to target specific muscles, medicine balls can help improve overall fitness. However, medicine balls are not sufficient solely on their own. To be most effective, combine the use of medicine balls with other forms of aerobic exercise such as walking, jogging, cycling, or swimming. Major benefits of using a medicine ball include improving muscular power, endurance, and overall fitness.

Since you’re new to exercising with medicine balls, it’s better to start with a light ball (3 to 10 pounds) and work your way up to greater resistance so that you can learn to maintain proper form. Simply holding a medicine ball over your head while you do crunches can improve your abdominal workout. Or you can recruit a partner to stand above you at your feet, while you sit and hold the medicine ball at chest level. When you lift up in your crunch position, toss the medicine ball to your partner and hold your crunch until your partner tosses it back. Lower and repeat. Make sure you have a spacious workout area. Or, if weather permits, take your medicine ball outside for a workout!

Here are a few more exercises to get you started:

- Beginning in a squat position, hold the medicine ball in both hands between your legs. In a rapid movement, bring your arms upward and over your head. Then, bring your arms down and release the ball at chest level. Repeat.
- Lie on your back with your legs straight and your arms extended over your head, holding the medicine ball. Simultaneously raise your legs and arms into a seated V-position, bringing the medicine ball over your head. Return to start position and repeat.
- Sit on the floor with your knees bent, feet flat, and hold the ball at chest level. Lift your legs slightly to a 90 degree angle and rotate your torso to the left, tapping the ball on the floor outside your left hip. Bring the ball back to your chest and rotate to the right,
tapping the ball on the floor outside your right hip to complete one repetition. Repeat.

The size and shape of the medicine ball you choose may vary depending on the exercise being performed—probably anywhere from 2 pounds to over 25 pounds. A heavier ball is good for strength training, while a lighter ball is good for speed training. Many are round, but some also have handles, sports-specific shapes, or even ropes attached. The size does not always correlate to the weight. The materials in medicine balls usually include leather, nylon, or another rubberized material.

Strength training should be done a minimum of two days a week, with 8 to 12 repetitions of 8 to 10 different exercises that target major muscle groups. Not all of these exercises need to be done with medicine balls. Strength training can also be accomplished using body weight, resistance bands, free weights, or weight machines. If you are planning on a rigorous physical activity regiment, it’s always recommended that you speak with a healthcare provider. In addition to determining your health and fitness, s/he can provide you with more detailed information about developing a safer and more effective exercise program for your specific needs. For a more personalized consultation on how to use a medicine ball, consider talking with a certified personal trainer at a fitness center.

Alice!

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