

Give Your Balance a Boost:

Simple exercises can help prevent a dangerous fall

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Do you remember when you were a kid and could walk up and down a balance beam, play hopscotch, dance ballet, or ride a bicycle without using your hands? Have you noticed these and other simple childhood balancing acts more difficult over the years?

Unfortunately, we all start to lose our sense of balance around our mid-20s. By the time we hit our 60s, a lack of balance goes from an inconvenience to a dangerous condition that could lead to a life-threatening fall.

In fact, falls are the No. 1 reason adults age 25 and older land in the emergency room. In 2012, about 9 million people of all ages were treated for fall-related injuries.

Simple ways to boost your balance

No matter your age, you can always boost your balance. Once you've received your doctor's approval, start with simple exercises you can do every day:

- Stand on one foot. Hold the back of a chair or a countertop and stand on one foot for 10 seconds. Repeat on the opposite foot and do four more sets. With practice, as you get more stable, let go of your support. Just keep your hands slightly close to your chair or support in case you need it.
- Stand up to put your socks on. This requires you to balance on one foot, then the other. At first, go slowly and lean against the bed. That way, if you lose your balance, you'll land on something soft.
- Lift like a crane. Put a lightweight object on a chair. Balance on one foot, lean forward with your back straight, and pick it up. Stand upright, put the object in your other hand, and place it back on the chair using the same posture you used to pick it up. Then switch legs and do it again. As you get better at this, put the item on lower surfaces until you can pick it up off the floor.

- Toe-heel balance. Hold onto the back of a chair with both hands. Stand on your toes and hold that position for 10 seconds. Then rock back to your heels, holding that position for 10 seconds. Repeat about five times.
- Hip circles. Hold onto a solid surface with both hands. Without moving your shoulders or feet, make a big circle to the left with your hip. After you make five circles to the left, make five circles to the right.

Take your balance to the next level

If you're in good shape and have a reliable sense of balance, but want to step up your training, you can try these more advanced exercises:

- Play catch with an exercise ball (also called a medicine or fitness ball). This simple exercise trains the muscles to be suddenly jostled and to quickly recover, like when a person bumps into you on a crowded sidewalk. The ball doesn't have to be extremely heavy to be effective. You can start with a 4-pound ball and work your way up.
- Build your core. Strengthening your core muscles (stomach, back, hips, and pelvis) also increases balance and stability. Simple leg lifts are just one of many exercises you can do every day to work these important balancing muscles. To get started, lie on your back on the floor or bed. Contract your stomach muscles while raising one leg about 5 inches and hold it for three seconds. Lower it and repeat with other leg. Do this five times on each side.
- Take up Tai chi. People of all ages who routinely practice the noncompetitive martial art of tai chi- which emphasizes slow, gentle movements, and stretching- can improve their balance and muscle tone. Tai chi is a lifelong exercise practiced around the world by people of all ages- even those in wheelchairs.

Simple, regular exercise is key to improving and maintaining a healthy sense of balance as you age. By developing a daily routine, you can reduce your risk of taking a dangerous fall. But before you start any exercise program, it's always best to consult with your physician to make sure it's right for you.

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