

SENIORS IMPROVE YOUR BALANCE!

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Good balance means being able to control and maintain your body's position, whether moving or just standing still. An intact sense of balance helps you walk without staggering, get up from a chair without falling and climb stairs without difficulty.

But as we get older changes, such as diminished balance and poor depth perception, often occur that can make falls more likely. In fact, accidents are the sixth most prevalent cause of death in people over 75, with falls being the leading reason. Each year, about 2 million Americans over age 65 are injured in falls. Many factors contribute to making older adults susceptible to falls. These include: impaired vision and hearing, loss of strength and muscle tone, vertigo (a feeling that the things around you are spinning), arthritis, a stroke, changes in the alignment of your spine, a sudden decrease in blood pressure as you stand, as well as various illnesses such as Parkinson's disease.

Balance Disorders

There are many types of balance disorders. One of the most common is benign paroxysmal positional vertigo (BPPV). With BPPV, you experience a feeling of vertigo that can occur when you change the position of your head. You may also experience BPPV when you roll over to your left or right in bed, or as you get out of bed in the morning. In BPPV, small calcium deposits in the inner ear become displaced, causing you to feel dizzy. The cause of BPPV is not known, although it may be caused by

an inner ear infection, head injury, or just aging. (This writer has had BPPV for many years. Recently a head manipulation procedure, called the Epley Manuver, has helped alleviate the condition.)

Labyrinthitis is an infection or inflammation of the inner ear that causes dizziness and loss of balance. (The labyrinth is the organ in your inner ear that helps you maintain your balance.)

Ménière's disease is another balance disorder. Symptoms include vertigo, hearing loss that comes and goes, tinnitus (ringing in the ears) and a feeling of fullness in the ear.

Balance disorder treatment options depend on the cause and should be treated by a medical professional. For example, if caused by medication, your doctor may change the type of medication or lower the dosage.

Reducing Your Risk of Falling

In 2005, the last year for which statistics are available, 435,000 people over 65 were admitted to hospitals after falling, and a shocking 15,800 died as a direct result of the fall. Less visible are the many who survive a fall but suffer indirect consequences. For some, the fall sets off a downward spiral of problems – including infection, pneumonia, muscle loss and isolation.

Once considered an inevitable part of aging, falls are now recognized as an often preventable event. When younger people fall, they tend to break their wrists, but older people who have slower reaction times and less upper-body strength, more often fall on their hips or head. Any underlying medical conditions, like heart disease or respiratory problems, increase the chances of a downward health spiral. The following multi-pronged approach can greatly reduce your chances of falling and injuring yourself.

Trip-proof Your Home

Tour your home for anything that could cause you to trip. Area rugs and electric cords are obvious hazards. You're more likely

to lose your balance in a dark space because you don't have a spatial point of reference. So add brighter lighting. And install night-lights in hallways and bathrooms so you don't stumble when you get up in the middle of the night. Place non-slip mats on shower and bathtub floors. Add grab bars next to and inside your shower or tub. Also, make sure the railings along stairways are strong enough to support your weight when you lean on them.

Arrange for a Medication Check-Up

Have a health care provider review of all your medications including nonprescription drugs like supplements and cold medicines. Drug interactions or side effects such as drowsiness or dizziness can make falls more likely.

Have Your Vision Checked

Schedule an eye exam because poor vision or eyesight clouded by cataracts or glaucoma can also increase your chances of falling.

Strengthen Your Legs

Being overly cautious when it comes to exercise may actually make your balance worse. Because restricting physical activities leads to weakened muscles. Exercise improves leg strength which in turn can reduce your risk of falling.

The ideal time for someone to begin an exercise program is before you have a fall. But it's never too late to acquire the benefits of exercise. Walking, stretching, weight training, dancing, yoga, and tai chi can improve mobility and balance – even after a fall.

In addition to making your daily life easier, strong legs can also help catch you if you do trip. The easiest way to strengthen your legs is to use them. Walk around the block. Take the stairs. And practice standing up and sitting down from a chair. Work in your yard. Anything that uses your legs will make them incrementally stronger.

Train Your Balance

Few people know that you can train your balance. Balance exercises involve putting your body into a slightly unstable position. This can include standing with one foot in front of the other (like you're on a balance beam), or standing on one foot. Just place your feet in the correct position and try to hold for ten to twenty seconds.

You should always do balance exercises next to something that you can hold on to as needed, like a sturdy chair, table, door knob or the back of a couch. Balance exercises should be done daily.

Balance Training Exercises

The following are specific exercises designed to improve your balance. Once again remember to initially hold onto a secure object when performing balance exercises.

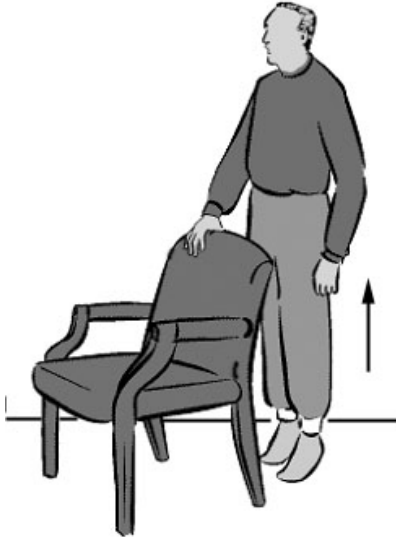


Figure 1: Plantar Flexion Exercise

- 1. Stand straight, holding onto a table or chair for balance.**
- 2. Slowly stand on tip toe, as high as possible.**
- 3. Hold this position.**
- 4. Slowly lower your heels all the way back down.**
- 5. Repeat 8 to 15 times.**
- 6. Rest a minute, then do another 8 to 15 repetitions.**
- 7. As you progress, hold onto the chair with one hand, then one fingertip, then no hands and finally,**

if you are steady, try to do the exercise with your eyes closed.



Figure 2: Knee Flexion Exercise

The knee flexion is an excellent balance training exercise. Attempt to lift your knee as high as your hip. When you begin use a secure chair or table to assist in maintaining your balance.

1. Stand straight; hold onto table or chair for balance.
2. Slowly bend one knee as far as possible, so your foot lifts up behind you.
3. Hold this position.
4. Slowly lower your foot down.
5. Repeat with other leg.
6. As you progress, hold onto the chair with one hand, then one fingertip, then no hands and, if you are steady, try the exercise with your eyes closed.

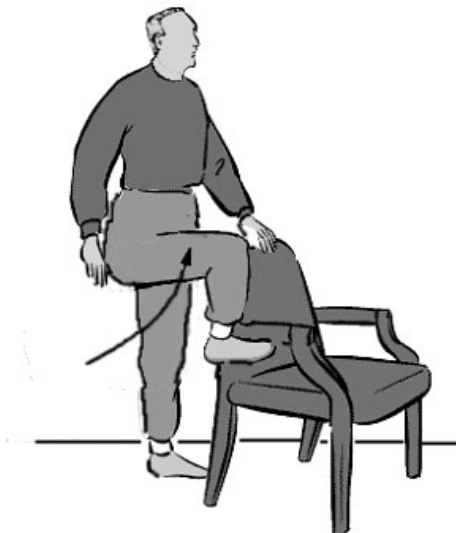


Figure 3: Hip Flexion Exercise

1. Stand straight; holding onto a table or chair for balance.
2. Slowly bend one knee toward chest, without bending waist or hips.
3. Hold this position.
4. Slowly lower your leg all the way down.
5. Repeat with other leg.
6. As you progress, hold onto the chair with one hand, then one fingertip, then no hands and finally, if you are steady, try it with your eyes closed.



Figure 4: Hip Extension Exercise

1. Stand 12 to 18 inches from table.
2. Hold onto a chair and bend slightly at hips.
3. Slowly lift one leg straight backwards.
4. Hold this position.
5. Slowly lower the leg.
6. Repeat with the other leg.
7. As you progress, hold onto the chair with one hand, then one fingertip, then no hands and, if you are steady, try with your eyes closed.



Figure 5: Side Leg Raise Exercise

1. Stand straight - directly behind a table or chair, feet slightly apart.
2. Hold onto chair for balance.
3. Slowly lift one leg to side, 6 to 12 inches.
4. Hold the position.
5. Slowly lower your leg.
6. Repeat with the other leg. Keep your legs straight throughout the exercise.
7. As you progress, hold onto the chair with one hand, then one fingertip, then no hands and finally, if you are steady, try to do the exercise with your eyes closed.

Other Exercises

The following exercises can also improve your balance. Do them almost anytime, anywhere, and as often as you like, as long as you have something sturdy nearby to hold onto if you become unsteady.

- **Walk heel-to-toe. Position your heel just in front of the toes of the opposite foot each time you take a step. (Your heel and toes should touch or almost touch.)**
- **Stand on one foot (while waiting in line at the grocery store or at the bus stop, for example). Alternate feet.**
- **Stand up and sit down. Try to gradually decrease use of your arms as your legs as you get stronger.**

Balance Summary

If you want to improve your balance and reduce your risk of falling, do the balance training exercises illustrated in the previous pages as well as exercises that improve your leg strength (such as walking), trip-proof your home, have your physician check your medication for possible drug interactions or side effects (that cause drowsiness or dizziness) and have your vision checked.

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