

BALANCE EXERCISES

Exercise in general is an important and easy way to improve balance (which prevents falls), increase flexibility which may speed recovery from injuries, and make activities that require strength and endurance more comfortable. While exercise is important for people of all ages, it becomes especially important in older age. The old adage “use it, or lose it” applies to all system in our bodies, from our muscles to our brain. By working on some simple exercises for a few minutes a day you will soon begin to notice numerous benefits.

Remember to go easy at first when starting a new exercise program. The benefit from an exercise program is developed over weeks and months of incorporating gentle exercise into your daily lifestyle, not in burning yourself out or injuring yourself within the first few days. If while exercising, or at any time, you have any new, undiagnosed symptom, chest pain, irregular, rapid or fluttery heart beats, or severe shortness of breath, make sure to consult your doctor. If you have had a hip repair or replacement do not cross your legs, bend your hips farther than a 90-degree angle, and avoid locking the joints in your legs into a strained position.

Balance exercises build leg muscles and the nerve pathways in the brain responsible for balance and therefore help prevent falls. Each year, U.S. hospitals have 300,000 admissions for broken hips, and falling is the leading cause of hip fractures. Balance exercises can help you stay independent by helping you avoid disabilities that may result from falling.

Safety tips:

- 1) Hold onto a table or chair for balance with only one hand. As you progress, try holding on with only one fingertip.
- 2) Next, try the following exercises without holding on at all. Ask someone to watch you the first few times in case you lose your balance.
- 3) If you are very steady on your feet, move on to doing the exercises using no hands, with your eyes closed. Have someone stand close by if you are unsteady.

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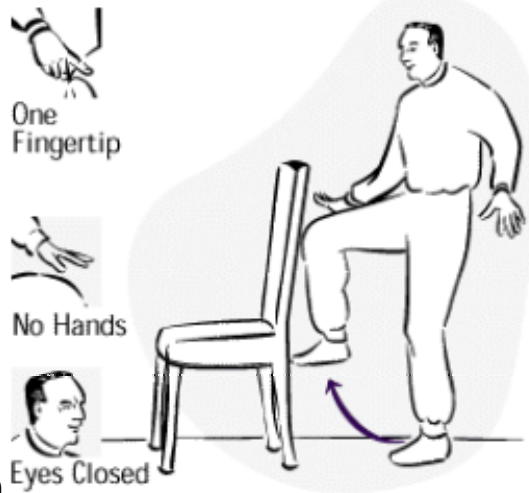


Side Leg Raises

This exercise strengthens muscles at the sides of the hips and thighs. Strengthening these muscles is important for good balance.

1. Stand straight, directly behind a table or chair, feet slightly apart.
2. Hold table or chair for balance
3. Slowly lift one leg to the side, 6 to 12 inches out to the side. Keep your back and both legs straight. Don't point your toes downward – keep them facing forward. Hold this position.
4. Slowly lower leg. Repeat with your other leg.
5. Keep back and knee straight throughout the exercise.
6. Alternate legs until you repeat the exercise 8 to 15 times with each leg.
7. Rest. Then do another set of 8 to 15 alternating repetitions.

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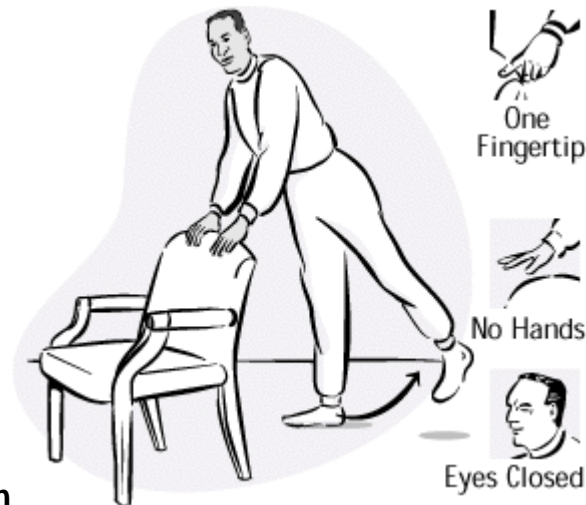


Hip Flexion

This exercise strengthens your thigh and hip muscles which are also important for balance.

1. Stand straight and hold onto a table or chair for balance.
2. Slowly bend one knee towards your chest, without bending at your waist.
3. Hold this position for 1 second.
4. Slowly lower leg all the way down. Pause.
5. Repeat with your other leg
6. Alternate legs until you have done 8 to 15 repetitions with each leg.
7. Rest; then do another set of 8 to 15 alternating repetitions.

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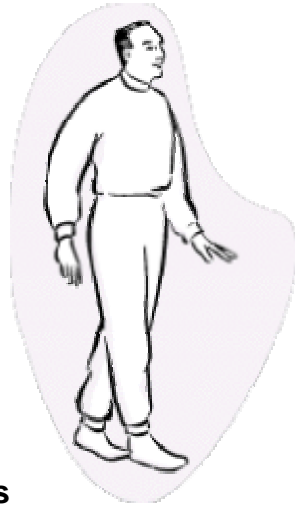


Hip Extension

This exercise is for your buttocks and lower back muscles.

1. Stand 12 to 18 inches away from a table or chair, feet slightly apart.
2. Bend forward at your hips at about a 45-degree angle. Hold onto a table or chair for balance.
3. Slowly lift one leg straight backwards without bending your knee, point your toes, or bending your upper body any farther forward.
4. Hold this position for 1 second.
5. Slowly lower leg. Pause.
6. Repeat with your other leg.
7. Alternate legs until you have done 8 to 15 repetitions with each leg.
8. Rest. Then do another set of 8 to 15 alternating repetitions.

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Anytime-Anywhere Exercises

These exercises will help improve your sense of balance. You can do them almost anywhere and as often as you like. Just make sure that 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 your opposite foot each time you take a step. Your heel and toes should touch or almost touch. This is like simulating walking on a tight rope.

Stand on One Foot

You can do this while waiting in line at the grocery store or at the bus stop. Alternate feet. Make sure you have something to steady yourself.

Standing Up/Sitting Down

Stand up and sit down without using your hands. Do this slowly and with someone or something to steady yourself if you should start to lose your balance.

Throwing a Rubber Ball

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Have fun throwing a small rubber ball back and forth from hand to hand. This develops hand-eye coordination. You can do this exercise while seated and while doing other things like watching TV. You can also practice this exercise with variations like bouncing the ball off the floor or wall.

Eye Exercises

Do these exercises while seated. For a target you can use a large letter cut out and taped to the wall (like the A from a headline in USA Today). Make sure the target/letter is at eye level. If you feel dizzy, slow down or stop these exercises. As your ability improves you may start to move your head slightly faster.

1. Turn your head slowly from side to side, while keeping your eyes focused on a specific target.
2. Tilt your head up and down, while keeping your eyes focused on a specific target. Removal trifocals or bifocals for this exercise.
3. When you are able to do exercises 1 and 2 at a fairly fast speed without them being uncomfortable, place the target on a “busy” background, such as a checkerboard or striped or flowered wallpaper, and repeat exercises number 1 and 2.



Testing your progress

1. Time yourself as you stand on one foot, without support, for as long as possible.
2. Stand near something sturdy to hold onto in case you lose your balance.
3. Repeat the test while standing on the other foot.
4. Test and record your scores each month.

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The benefits of exercise are limitless. Science has already shown that exercise can improve mood and relieve depression, and prevent or delay some types of cancer, heart disease, and diabetes. Long-term, regular exercise can improve health for some older people who already have diseases and disabilities. Regular exercise will not only improve the quantity of your life, but more importantly the quality of your life.

Additional information about healthy senior living including exercises, lifestyle choices, and preventative and wellness suggestions can be found on the following websites:

National Institute for Health, Senior Health Website
<http://nihseniorhealth.gov/>

Exercise: A Guide from the National Institute on Aging
<http://weboflife.ksc.nasa.gov/exerciseandaging/toc.html>

Making It Work

There are lots of ways to increase your physical activity. Exercising at home is just one of them, and we discussed it here because it's within the reach of most older people. You might decide to follow Phyllis Wendahl's example, instead, and do something different.

Ms. Wendahl is 85 years old and lives in the small town of Bothell, Washington. On the phone, she sounds much younger. She is a widow and lives on her Social Security income, and, like many older adults, she won't let her kids spoil her as much as they would like to. She would rather do things on her own.

That's why, when she was scouting around for a fitness club where she could use strength-building equipment, she bargained the owner down to a monthly fee that she felt she could afford - \$25 a month for unlimited use.

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"Look, I know that not everybody is as bold as I am about that kind of thing," Ms. Wendahl told us. Nonetheless, she has some advice for older adults who are thinking about going to a fitness center: "They don't need to feel self-conscious about going to the club. The owner of my club holds me up as an example now."

Ms. Wendahl said that she has always been active, but never as much as she is now. She began doing aerobic exercises in her 70s, moved on to water aerobics, and most recently to strength-building and stretching 3 times a week. She lives on her own and drives herself wherever she needs to go. After 6 months of endurance and strength exercises, measurements showed that Mrs. Wendahl was able to perform household tasks - carrying groceries, making her bed, and transferring laundry - more quickly. She could also carry more weight.

"It has just done me a world of good," she said of her physically active lifestyle. "My family is so thrilled and proud of me," she added.

She wants older adults to know that, when it comes to exercise and physical activity, "there's always something within someone's capabilities. There's no reason older people need to be sitting in a rocking chair."

