

ASK THE DOCTOR *Wellness* **select** *Care* HEALTH PLANS

Q. What are some ways I can improve my balance?

A. It's a good idea to make balance training a part of your regular exercise routine. It can improve mobility, increase strength, give you better posture, and lower the risk of falls. Your sense of balance begins to decline in your twenties. If you stay active throughout your life, you can preserve it into old age.

Most people don't think about improving their balance until they have a problem. Older adults with poor balance risk falls and fractures. One in three adults over age 65 falls each year. This is a common cause of broken arms, ankles, and hips. Doing balance exercises can help you prevent injuries and maintain your independence.

You can benefit from balance training whether you are young or old. Try some of these exercises:

- **Stand on one foot.** Bend one knee and lift your foot about six inches off the ground. Use a timer. You can grab a hold of something if you start to lose balance. Keep your leg lifted for 60 seconds and then switch to the other. Called the "flamingo exercise," this has been proven in a study to reduce falls in people over age 75.



- **Heel-to-toe walk.** Walk around the room with your heel touching the toes of your opposite foot with each step. For added difficulty, try it with your eyes closed.
- **Straight-line walk.** Walk in as straight a line as possible. Practice walking on a curb as if you're a gymnast on the balance beam.
- **Do squats.** Lower body strength training can help your balance a lot. Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart and lower slowly into a squatting position. Too easy? Try it on one leg. Or, do barbell squats in the gym for added weight resistance.

- **Tai chi, yoga, or Pilates.** These activities improve your mobility and stability. A study found that tai chi reduced falls in seniors by up to 45 percent. Sign up for a group class at a local gym or community center. Or learn to do them on your own using videos or books.
- **Do exercises to improve your balance each week.** It doesn't need to take a lot of time. You can practice standing on one leg as you brush your teeth or wait for the bus. Are you a regular at the gym? Incorporate some balance training into your workout. Lift with free weights instead of machines. Try crunches on an exercise ball instead of the floor.

Everyone can benefit from an improved sense of balance. It doesn't matter if you are an athlete or an aging senior. So get started today. Work on a few exercises over the course of a few months. You'll notice a difference in your mobility, strength, speed, and posture.

Sources: National Institutes of Health. Harvard School of Public Health.

