

4 EASY WAYS TO BUILD BETTER BALANCE

These exercises are so simple you can sneak them into your daily activities...



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When it comes to health risks, most people can rattle off a list that includes being overweight, eating an unhealthy diet and sitting too much. Few people would think to name poor balance as a serious danger...but they should.

Balance is a crucial but under-recognized element of good health. Unfortunately, loss of muscle strength and other factors cause us to become more wobbly as we age. So it's no surprise that one of every four adults age 65 and older in the US reports falling each year.

The good news is, balance is a skill that you can improve. *Here's how...*

Getting started

Feeling insecure about your balance can lead to a fear of falling, which will inhibit your daily activities—and actually *increase* your risk of falling. Practicing your balance will help you gain more confidence and overcome any fear you may have.

Important: Balance problems can be caused by a variety of medical conditions. Some of the most common causes are abnormalities in the vestibular system (the inner ear)...weak muscles or unstable joints...less visual acuity...certain medications...alcohol...and various neurological disorders, including peripheral neuropathy—especially involving nerves of the feet. Your doctor can rule out any medical problems that may make balance practice unsafe or give you the go-ahead to begin the regimen described below.

4 balance boosters

To improve your balance, a good strategy is to fit a few targeted moves into your everyday activities. Within a matter of days, you'll begin to incorporate them into your daily routine—and without

even breaking a sweat. *My favorite everyday balance boosters can be done while...*

• Watching television. *What to do:*

While sitting, take off your shoes and socks, prop one foot up on a coffee table or the couch, and interlace your fingers between your toes. Use your fingers to spread out all five toes so that they are not touching one another. Maintain this position for one minute. Relax. Repeat on your other foot. Then alternate flexing and pointing each foot 10 times. Finally, try to wiggle each toe one at a time. This may be difficult at first, but remember that you will improve with practice. These relaxed micro-movements of the foot are an important part of standing and balancing.

• Brushing your teeth. *What to do:*

Lightly place the fourth (ring) finger of your nonbrushing hand on the edge of the sink or vanity, so as you stand, you have that bit of support from your finger on the counter but are not holding on tightly. (Use this finger, since it is capable of only light touch to steady yourself.) Move one foot slightly behind you and off the floor. This exercise will force you to adjust your center of gravity and recruit more hip and core muscles to stabilize yourself. Alternate feet morning and night, optimally for as long as it takes you to brush your teeth. If you lose your balance at first, touch the nonstanding foot to the floor lightly to steady yourself and calmly resume balancing.

To up your game: Stand on one foot *without* touching the sink...then with your free arm extended overhead.

• Talking on the phone. *What to do:*

Stand up. With your feet hip-width apart and your knees directly over your ankles, imagine yourself squeezing a balloon between your shins. This squeezing motion, called adduction, will strengthen your adductor muscles of the inner thighs and hips to help keep you stable.

• Walking down a hallway. *What to do:*

Find a safe, clear hallway and walk down it backward at least once a day.

This exercise requires coordination of reversed foot mechanics and the transfer of weight in the less familiar backward direction. The first time you do this, look over your shoulder and count the number of steps it takes until you reach the end. After that, you can count out that number of steps in your head while keeping your gaze forward. If you feel unsteady, reach out to the wall on either side of you or have someone with you. Gazing forward is easier on the neck, and you can't use sight to orient yourself in the familiar forward direction.

Most important: In addition to these exercises, find an enjoyable activity that keeps you on your feet. Whether it's dancing, playing table tennis, flying a kite or walking your dog, the more you move, the better your balance!

For a self-test to check your balance:
go to BLHExtra.com, code: 973600

Bottom Line Health interviewed Carol Clements, MA, who has more than 45 years of experience as a personal trainer and teacher of many movement arts, techniques and methods. She is also author of *Better Balance for Life* and works privately with clients in New York City. CarolClements.com