

Life in the Balance

By John M. Parr

Falls are the leading cause of injury to senior adults sixty-five and older. We are falling down at an alarming rate, causing severe injuries and unexpected death. I'm talking about common, everyday falls such as stumbling on the stairs, tripping on a cord or a throw rug, or walking down a grassy slope.

Each year, approximately one-third of America's senior adults suffer injuries from falling that require medical treatment, according to research and analysis by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).¹ In 2004, there were an estimated 320,000 hospital admissions for hip fractures. In a majority of the cases, recovery took over one year and the event marked the end of the injured party's independent living. There is an underlying mental injury from these falls. Often the injured party will become fearful of future falls and stop most physical activities. In fact, according to some studies, the fear of falling is the number one fear among senior adults—and it is a silent fear. Victims, such as my mother, quietly, and without explanation, stop moving.²

Balance is our ability to maintain the body's position over a base of support, whether we are standing still or moving. Our ability to maintain balance deteriorates as we age. However, with balance and strength exercise, we can maintain and even improve our balance.

Take the Test

Stand on the floor in bare feet and lift one foot off the ground about six inches, bending the knee at a forty-five degree angle. Hold it up as long as you can. Now do the same movement on the other foot. Were you shaky? How long did you hold each foot up? You should be able to hold your foot up for thirty seconds. Most senior adults cannot hold the position for thirty seconds. Even if they do, there is still base work to do.

So, Now What?

1. See your primary care provider for a balance checkup. Is your balance affected by a chronic disease or your medication? Is your eyeglass prescription up to date? Do you have any physical profiles that restrict or prevent you from exercising?
2. Consider taking six to eight balance and strength training sessions with a qualified personal trainer who understands that when the sessions are over you want to have a simple exercise program you can follow on your own.
3. Make your office, home, and surroundings as safe as possible by installing safety features and eliminating hazards such as throw rugs and electrical cords and wires.



4. Take a beginning Tai Chi class.
5. Do these "anytime, anywhere" exercises as often as you can.
 - a. 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.
 - b. Practice standing up and sitting down without using your hands.
 - c. Stand on one foot. You can do this while waiting in line at the grocery store or while barbecuing in your backyard. Remember to alternate feet.
6. Review the exercise guide at the Web site set out below.³

Your balance will improve as you practice these balance exercises, but the change will be subtle. Take the one foot test every couple weeks and keep track as your standing time improves.

Balance, strength, and flexibility create the support for healthy aging and lifetime independence and help us to maintain our confidence and fight off the fears of aging. **VOE**

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Endnotes

1. *Costs of Falls Among Older Adults*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, available at <http://www.cdc.gov/HomeandRecreationalSafety/Falls/fallcost.html>.
2. *Falls Among Older Adults: An Overview*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, available at <http://www.cdc.gov/nccpc/factsheets/adultfalls.htm>.
3. *Chapter 4: Sample Exercises—Strength/Balance Exercises*, National Institute on Aging, available at <http://www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation/Publications/ExerciseGuide/chapter04b.htm>.