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Dr. Sheri Colberg's Balance Exercises

Test Your Balance: If you think you already have great balance, first test it out before you assume too much: stand on one leg and *shut your eyes*. (Don't try doing this without holding onto something or having something close by that you can grab if you need to.) If you can't stand steadily on one leg for at least 15 seconds -- with or without your eyes closed -- then you definitely need to start practicing as soon as possible to improve your balance. Begin by doing the following exercises on a daily basis to improve your balance and lower your risk of falling.

Balance Activity	**Movements required**
Single leg balance	Facing a wall for support, eyes open, balance on one leg for 10-20 seconds. Repeat on other leg.
Three-way leg swing	Stand on a single foot, hands on hips. Swing the other foot forward 10 times, sideways 10 times, and backwards 10 times, returning to the (middle) starting position after holding each outward position for 5 seconds per repetition.
Balance/Reach	Stand on both feet, then bend knees and lower body and reach across the body with the opposite hand. Can be done single legged for progression.
Forward Lean	Stand on one or both feet, hands on hips. Bend forward as if to touch forehead to the wall. Hold 10-15 seconds.
Toe Raise	Rock back on heels while standing upright. Repeat 10 times.
Heel Raise	Stand on both feet, rise on the balls of both feet, and repeat 10 times. Can be done single legged.

Single Leg Balance Exercise Modifications: The easiest balance exercise is to hold onto a table with both hands while standing on one leg. Once you feel stable doing this exercise in this position, though, you should try it with less support (as outlined below). This exercise should be minimally done two to three times a day on alternating feet. Within a couple of weeks or months, your balance will rapidly improve.

This easy exercise can improve your balance further if you modify it slightly. Incorporate these more advanced balance techniques as you progress: (1) hold on with only one hand; (2) hold on with just one fingertip; (3) don't hold on at all; and (4) if you

are very steady on your feet, close your eyes (still without holding on). It's a good idea to have someone stand close by in case you ever feel unsteady, though, particularly when your eyes are closed. Switch legs and repeat often, both with your eyes open and with them closed.

Anytime Balance Exercises: The following exercises also improve your balance--regardless of how young and steady you still are. You can do them almost anytime and as often as you like, as long as you have something sturdy nearby to hold onto if needed.

- ***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 come close. You may want to start first going along hand rails or with a wall next to you.
- ***Walk backwards***. Try walking backwards along a wall or a kitchen counter without looking back, using the wall or counter to steady yourself infrequently.
- ***Stand on a cushion or other unstable surface***. Try using cushions or pillows of varying firmness, and stand on them with your legs alternately together and apart.
- ***Stand with a changed position***. Try standing under different conditions—with your eyes open or closed, your head tilted to one side or straight, your mouth talking or silent, and your hands at your sides or out from your body.
- ***Grab a towel with your toes***. Place a towel on the floor and practice grabbing it with the toes of both of your feet, alternately, while both sitting and standing.

Other Helpful Activities: Tai chi is excellent for improving balance. Getting involved in tai chi or any form of martial arts training will allow you to practice your balance while gaining lower body strength. Lower-body resistance training also doubles as balance exercise. When you do your regular strength exercises, your balance should improve at the same time. Finally, maintaining your flexibility will improve your balance, so get involved with yoga (to work on flexibility and strength at the same time) or simply engage in stretching on a regular basis to keep a wider range of motion around all of your joints.

Although falling down in inevitable at any age, you can substantially reduce your risk of falling by improving your balance, lower body strength, flexibility (especially in your ankles), fitness, and agility. Work on balance exercises daily for the best results.

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