

Preventing Falls: Exercises for Strength and Balance

Get started

As people age, they lose muscle strength, which can make them more likely to fall. Also, their reflexes slow down. This makes it harder for them to regain their balance if they start to fall.

Learn some strength and balance exercises, and take the time to do them each day. This can help you stay active and independent.

First steps

- **Start by standing** next to the wall, the sink, or countertop. Or if you prefer, you can sit in a sturdy, straight-backed chair.
- **Warm up.** Breathe in deeply through your nose. Lift your arms above your head, and stretch. Lower your arms, and breathe out.
- **Do shoulder rolls.** Gently rotate your shoulders up to the ceiling, backward, and down. Then try this movement in reverse. Gently rotate your shoulders up to the ceiling, forward, and down.
- **Do calf stretches while standing.** Stretch one leg behind you, with your foot flat on the floor and your toes facing forward. Gently bend your front knee until you feel a stretch in your calf. Hold the stretch for 15 to 30 seconds. Repeat 2 to 4 times with each leg.
- **Or do calf stretches while sitting.** To stretch your calves while sitting down, use a towel. Place your leg out in front of you with your heel on the floor. Hold both ends of the towel and loop the middle of the towel under the ball of your foot. Gently pull the ends of the towel toward you while keeping your knee as straight as you can. Hold the stretch for 15 to 30 seconds. Repeat 2 to 4 times with each leg.
- **March in place.** Stand with a chair in front of you and a wall behind you. If you begin to fall, you may use them for support. Standing in a corner will also work. Stand with your feet slightly apart (as you normally stand) and your arms at your side. March in place, lifting your knees high toward the ceiling.

Exercises for improving your strength

Regular physical activity can help you stay strong, and it is safe for almost everyone. Start slowly and gradually increase your activity. Talk to your doctor if you have any problems.

To do any of these exercises, **stand up straight and use a counter or sturdy chair** for support. Start by doing each exercise a few times, and work your way up to 8 to 12 times for each exercise.

- **Leg bends.** Bend one knee so your foot comes up behind you and is level with your knee. Slowly lower your foot to the floor. Repeat, using the other leg.
- **Knee bends.** Hold onto the back of your chair. Stand with your knees relaxed and your back straight. Your knees should face the same direction as your toes. Slowly bend your knees, then raise your body by straightening your knees.
- **Heel raises.** Rise up onto your toes. Hold for a few seconds. Slowly lower your heels to the floor.
- **Leg lifts.** Hold onto the back of your chair. Keeping your legs straight, lift one leg a few inches to the side. Hold for a few seconds. Slowly lower your leg. Repeat on the other side.
- **Sit-to-stand.** Sit in your chair, with the chair against a wall. Stand up without using your hands. If this is too hard, start by using a pillow on the chair until you get stronger.

Exercises for improving your balance

These exercises can help you with balance. You can start by holding on with both hands. When that gets easy, hold on with just one hand. Then hold on with just two fingers of one hand. Soon you may be able to do each exercise without holding on with either hand. But it is important that you only try this when you feel that the way you are doing it now has become too easy.

The first exercise has 4 steps. Remember to relax and take slow, deep breaths. Keep yourself safe by going at your own pace. Trust your instincts, and don't push yourself to do too much too soon.

- **One-leg balance.** Hold onto the sink, the counter, or the back of your chair with both hands. Try the first step below. If you can do that one easily, go on to the second step. If not, just do step one of this exercise for now and move on to the next exercise. Keep yourself safe, and go at your own pace.
 - First step: Stand on one leg. Balance for as long as you can, working up to 60 seconds on each leg. When you can do this for 60 seconds, try the next exercise.
 - Second step: Stand on one leg and fold your arms across your chest. When you can do this for 60 seconds on each leg, go on to the next exercise.
 - Third step: Stand on one leg and hold your arms out to the sides. When you can do this for 60 seconds on each leg, try the next exercise.
 - Fourth step: Stand on one leg and fold your arms across your chest with your eyes closed. Balance for as long as you can, working up to 60 seconds on each leg.
- **Toe-heel balance.** Hold onto the sink, the counter, or the back of your chair with both hands. Stand on your toes and hold that position for 10 seconds. Then rock back to your heels, holding that position for 10 seconds. Repeat about 5 times.

- **Hip circles.** Hold onto the sink, the counter, or the back of your chair with both hands. Without moving your shoulders or feet, make a big circle to the left with your hips (counterclockwise). After you make 5 circles to the left, make 5 circles to the right (clockwise).
- **Heel-toe walking.** Stand with your left side toward the kitchen counter. You can use the counter for balance if you need to. Place the heel of your left foot in front of the toes of your right foot so the heel and toes touch. Focus on a spot ahead of you, and take a step so that your right heel touches the toes of your left foot. Work up to 20 steps. You can turn around and go in the other direction, with the counter on your right.

Exercise programs and tai chi

In many communities, there are group exercise programs for older adults and classes such as tai chi. Check with your doctor to see if you can safely do tai chi exercises. Then contact your local hospital, community center, recreation program, or college to find out about classes.

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Preventing Falls in Older Adults

Every year, thousands of older adults fall and hurt themselves. Falls are one of the main causes of injury and loss of independence in people ages 65 and older.

There are many reasons older people fall. They may lose their footing when stepping off a street curb. Or they may fall after getting dizzy from taking medicines. Some falls may be related to the effects of aging, such as muscle weakness or delayed reflexes. Or falls may be related to the results of a stroke.

Experts agree that some falls in older adults can be prevented. But since each person's risks are a bit different, talk to your doctor about which of the tips below might help you.

Take care of yourself

- Keep your bones strong. Talk to your doctor to be sure you are getting enough vitamin D and calcium.
- Have your vision and hearing checked each year or anytime you notice a change. If you have trouble seeing and hearing, you might not be able to avoid objects that make you lose your balance.
- Call your doctor if you have calluses or corns on your feet that need to be removed or if you have sores that are not healing. If you wear loose-fitting shoes because of foot problems, you can lose your balance and fall.
- If you tend to feel lightheaded when you stand up quickly, take the time to get up slowly from your bed or chair. When you wake up, it may help to sit up first and count slowly to 10 before you try to stand up. And after you stand up, stay still for a few seconds before you move.
- If you are very weak or dizzy, don't try to walk around. Instead, see your doctor as soon as possible.
- Call your doctor if you are dizzy and lose your balance. You may have a health problem that needs treatment, such as a blood pressure or inner ear problem. Or you may be having a side effect from a medicine that you take.
- Be sure you are drinking enough water, especially if the weather is hot.

Take extra care if you live alone

- If you live alone, think about wearing an alert device that will bring help in case you fall and can't get up. Or carry a cordless or cell phone with you from room to room. Then you can quickly call for help if you need it.

- Set up a plan to make contact once a day with a family member or friend. Have one person who knows where you are.
- Learn how to get up from a fall. Try this when you have someone with you. If you can get up alone, practice this often enough to feel comfortable. If you can't get up by yourself, see a physical therapist for help.

Learn ways to keep your balance

- Learn to do a few exercises for strength and balance. Practicing these each day can help you stay active and independent.
- Wear low-heeled shoes that fit well and give your feet good support. Use footwear with nonskid soles. Repair or replace worn heels and soles.
- If you use a walker or cane, make sure it is fitted to you. If you use a cane, replace the rubber tip when it becomes worn.
- If you have pets, keep them in one place at night. Train your pets not to jump or get underfoot. Think about buying a collar with a bell for your pet so you will know when your pet is nearby.

Learn about your medicines

- Know the side effects of the medicines that you take. Ask your doctor if the medicines you take can affect your balance. For instance, sleeping pills and some medicines for anxiety can affect your balance.
- If you take two or more medicines, talk to your doctor about how they work together. Sometimes combinations of medicines can cause dizziness or sleepiness. Either of these can lead to a fall.

Make your home safer

- Remove or fix things you could trip over, such as raised doorway thresholds, throw rugs, or loose carpet.
- Keep paths clear of electrical cords and clutter.
- Use nonskid floor wax, and wipe up spills right away.
- Keep your house well lit. Use night-lights (or keep the overhead light on at night) in hallways and bathrooms.
- Put sturdy handrails on stairways. Make sure you have a light at the top and bottom of the stairs.
- Store things on lower shelves so you don't have to climb or reach high.
- Keep a phone and a flashlight by your bed. Check the flashlight batteries often to make sure they still work.

Stay safe while bathing

- Install grab handles and nonskid mats in the tub and shower.
- Use a shower chair or bath bench. You can also try using a hand-held shower head.
- Get into a tub or shower by putting the weaker leg in first. Get out of a tub or shower with your strong side first.

Prevent outdoor falls

- When you go outdoors, keep your hands free by using a cross-body shoulder bag, a fanny pack, or a backpack.
- If you wear bifocal or trifocal glasses, you may have problems as you step off curbs or climb stairs. See about getting glasses with a single prescription that you can wear when you walk.
- Find out about 24-hour drugstores and grocery stores near you that can take orders over the telephone and make deliveries to your home. Use these services, especially when the weather is bad.
- If you live in an area that gets snow and ice in the winter, have a family member or friend sprinkle salt or sand on slippery steps and sidewalks.

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Preventing Falls in Older Adults Who Take High-Risk Medicines

What does "high-risk" mean?

High-risk means that a medicine can cause serious health problems or accidents. High-risk doesn't always mean "do not use." It can mean "use with care" when a medicine is more likely to help you than harm you.

If you take a medicine that may make you feel confused, drowsy, or dizzy, pay attention to how it affects your balance and how it makes you feel. Take extra care to prevent a fall. A fall can lead to serious problems that can change your quality of life.

Examples of high-risk medicines include:

- Antipsychotics, such as haloperidol, quetiapine, and risperidone.
- Muscle relaxants, such as carisoprodol, cyclobenzaprine, and methocarbamol.
- Anxiety medicine, such as alprazolam, lorazepam, and oxazepam.
- Sleep medicine, such as zaleplon and zolpidem.
- Antidepressants, such as amitriptyline and paroxetine.
- Over-the-counter allergy and cold medicines that contain ingredients that may cause drowsiness, such as chlorpheniramine or diphenhydramine. Some medicines for sleep or pain also use diphenhydramine.

How can you prevent falls when you take high-risk medicine?

Be prepared for side effects

As you age, your body changes. When you take a medicine, you may get a stronger effect now than when you were younger. For example, you may get more dizzy or drowsy. And you may be more likely to have dangerous side effects when you take more than one medicine.

To help avoid serious side effects, talk to your doctor and pharmacist about your medicines.

- Make a list of everything you take. Include the dose and when you take it. Keep a copy with you, and take it to each doctor visit. Ask if there are any medicines that you don't need or shouldn't take. And ask if you could lower your dose of any of the medicines.
- Find out if a treatment without medicine might work for you.
- Use one drugstore, if possible. Before filling a new prescription, give the pharmacist your list of medicines. Ask about possible interactions with anything you are taking. If you use more than one drugstore, make sure each one has your list.

- Talk to your doctor about all side effects you have. Your doctor may want to change your dose or your medicine. Be sure to tell your doctor that you only want to take medicines that you really need, and at the lowest possible dose.

Learn to move wisely

- Stand up slowly. After you stand up, stay still for a few seconds before you move. If you feel dizzy, don't try to walk.
- If you have a problem with balance, walk carefully. Wear low-heeled shoes that fit well and give your feet good support. Use footwear with nonskid soles.
- If you are very weak, have someone help you get up, walk, and bathe.
- If one of your legs is stronger than the other, get into a tub or shower with your weaker leg first. Get out with your stronger side first.
- Use extra care if you use a cane, a walker, or crutches. They can slip out from under you on smooth, wet surfaces.
- If you have glasses, hearing aids, or both, be sure to use them.

Make changes to stay safe at home

- Keep walking paths clear. Remove throw rugs and clutter. Place furniture and electrical cords out of the way.
- Repair loose carpet or uneven flooring.
- Keep your living space well lit. At night, use night-lights. Keep a cordless phone and a flashlight by your bed.
- Install sturdy handrails on stairways. Put grab bars and nonskid mats in your shower or tub and near the toilet. Use a shower chair or bath bench when you bathe.
- Store items within easy reach. Avoid reaching overhead.
- If you have ice and snow during the winter, have a family member or friend sprinkle salt or sand on slippery steps and sidewalks.

Take care of yourself

- Before you take any prescription or over-the-counter medicine, ask your doctor or pharmacist if it might make you sleepy, less alert, or less aware of how you're moving. It's important to know ahead of time if you're going to be at risk for losing your balance and falling.
- When you are alone at home or outdoors, carry a phone or personal medical alert device with you. Then you can quickly call for help if you need it.

- Have your vision and hearing checked each year, or anytime you notice a change. Sight or hearing problems can cause falls.
- Talk to your doctor or physical therapist about exercises for improving your strength and balance. Exercise regularly.

When should you call your doctor?

Call 911 anytime you think you may need emergency care. For example, call if:

- You passed out (lost consciousness).
- You cannot get up after a fall.
- You believe you have serious or life-threatening injuries.
- You are having chest pain or trouble breathing.
- You are having trouble speaking, or you have new weakness or numbness on one side of your body.

Call your doctor now or seek medical care right away if:

- You feel faint.
- You develop severe pain.
- You think you may have passed out but aren't sure.
- You hit your head or think you may have hit your head but aren't sure.
- You think your medicine may have caused you to fall.

Watch closely for changes in your health, and be sure to contact your doctor if you have fallen, even if you aren't hurt.

Don't feel embarrassed to let your doctor know that you have fallen. Your doctor may be able to adjust your medicine or give other advice so you can prevent more falls.

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Checklist for Preventing Falls at Home

Every year, thousands of older adults fall and hurt themselves. Falls are one of the main causes of injury and disability in people age 65 and older. Those who fall once are 2 to 3 times more likely to fall again. Hip fractures are especially serious, and most of them are caused by falling.

Falls are often caused by hazards that are easy to overlook. But these hazards can also be easy to fix. This checklist helps you find hazards in each room of your home, and it gives tips on how to fix the problem.

Rooms and Areas to Check for Preventing Falls at Home

<p>Floors</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Move furniture so that your path through a room is clear.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Remove throw rugs on floors. Or use double-sided tape or a special backing so the rugs won't slip.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Pick up papers, books, shoes, boxes or other things that are on the floor. Always keep objects off the floor.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Coil or tape wires (such as extension cords or lamp or phone cords) next to the wall so you can't trip over them. If you need another power outlet, have an electrician install one.</p>
<p>Stairs and steps</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Pick up papers, shoes, books, or other things on stairs. Always keep objects off stairs.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Fix loose, broken, or uneven steps.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Make sure you have plenty of light in stairways. Have an electrician put in an overhead light at the top and bottom of the stairs. You can get light switches that glow.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> If you have burned-out lights in the stairway, have a friend or family member change the bulbs.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Make sure that the carpet is firmly attached to every step. Or you can remove the carpet and attach rubber treads to the stairs to prevent slips.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Fix loose handrails or put in new ones. Make sure handrails are on both sides of the stairs and span the full length of the stairs.</p>
<p>Kitchen</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Move items in your cabinets so that the things you use a lot are on the lower shelves (about waist level).</p>

___If you must use a step stool, get one with a bar to hold on to. Never use a chair as a step stool.	
Bathroom	
___Put a rubber mat that won't slip or self-stick strips on the floor of the tub or shower.	
___Have a carpenter install grab bars inside the tub and next to the toilet.	
Bedrooms	
___Place a lamp close to the bed where it's easy to reach.	
___Put in a night-light so you can see where you're walking. Some night-lights go on by themselves after dark. You might also turn on an overhead light in the hallway or bathroom before you go to bed.	
___Change the height of your bed if you have trouble getting in or out of bed. You might try a thinner mattress or a shorter bed frame.	
___Don't use sleepwear or bedspreads that are slippery.	

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