



Falling is Scary. Try Balance Training to Prevent It.

Though balance generally declines with age, many people don't realize it's happening until they take a tumble, says Debra Rose, professor and chair emerita of the Department of Kinesiology at California State University, Fullerton.

Falls are the leading cause of injury and injury-related death in adults over age 65. In 2022, more than 46,000 people in the U.S. died from falls at home or work. That's more than died from motor vehicle accidents.

Source: National Safety Council

That's what happened to Shana O'Brien, 58, the owner of a real estate brokerage in Vancouver, Washington, and Portland, Oregon. She was dancing with her husband in their home when one of her dogs ran between her legs, catching her off balance, and she fell. O'Brien says she landed on her bottom and one hand, crushing her wrist. To fix it, she needed surgery to implant a permanent titanium plate.

"It made me feel like a really old lady," she says, but it was also a wake-up call. She had to do something to improve her balance.

For O'Brien, that something has been yoga. But experts say there are many activities—including other balance-focused workouts and tweaks to existing workouts and routines—that can help us stay firmly on our feet as we age.

The Facts About Falling

HOW'S YOUR BALANCE?

One frequently suggested test for balance is seeing how long you can stand on one foot. Research shows that average times decline from 52 seconds in your 40s to 27 seconds in your 70s. But balance expert Debra Rose says she doesn't recommend it as a self-test for three reasons. It depends on both balance and strength; you might fall if you lack either of those; and most people don't do it right. (The secret is shifting your balance to one leg before lifting the other).

A better test, she says, is the timed *up-and-go test*, in which you rise from a sturdy chair, walk 10 feet, turn around, walk back, and sit down. The CDC says taking more than 12 seconds to do this test suggests a falling risk.

If you see a health professional about your risk of falling, they may combine several such tests with a questionnaire that asks, for example, whether you:

- have fallen in the last year;
- regularly steady yourself on furniture around the house;
- sometimes feel unsteady when you walk; or
- have lost feeling in your feet.

More yes answers mean you have a greater falling risk.

Find a full questionnaire from the National Council on Aging at ncoa.org/tools/falls-free-checkup/.

Falls are the leading cause of injury in adults over age 65, happening to one in four people every year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. One large study found that, in women, injuries from falls start arising even earlier, between ages 45 and 55. Bad balance isn't the only reason people fall. Everything from loose rugs to poor lighting to the wrong footwear can contribute, says Rose.

But the loss of balance that comes along with age is a bigger problem than many people realize. It not only increases the risk of falling but can also threaten your independence and keep you from doing things you love. "People stop going places and doing things because they don't feel quite balanced enough," she says.

Rose says this happens for several reasons, including age-related changes in proprioception: your body's ability to sense its own position and movements. Proprioception relies not only on your brain but also on receptors in your skin, muscles, and joints, and on structures in your inner ear. Changes in vision, including poor depth perception, play a role, as do chronic medical conditions and medications.

As your balance declines, you might not immediately notice as you walk more slowly, grab more handrails, and show other signs of unsteadiness. But you'll be at risk every time you walk on an uneven sidewalk, encounter a wet floor, or reach down to pull a weed from your garden.

You might think it's safest to just sit all day, but inactivity only makes things worse, says Carol Clements, a New York City dance therapist and personal trainer who is the author of *Better Balance for Life*. "Balance is a skill," says Clements. "It gets better with practice and deteriorates without it."

As people get wobblier, fear of falling can set in, leading to even more inactivity and worse balance, she says. "So, if you want to feel confident and be agile and not fall, balance training is important."

What Counts as Balance Training?

If you like the idea of a class, you have choices. Many senior living communities, gyms, and fitness centers offer balance and fall-prevention classes. Rose developed a program, outlined in her book, *Fallproof*, that is taught at many places around the country. Other options include disciplines such as yoga, tai chi, and mat Pilates.

If you've been injured in a fall or are frail, your doctor should refer you to a physical therapist to decide the best balance-training program for you, Rose says. However, if you're in reasonable health, there are lots of balance-boosting activities you can safely try as part of your regular workouts or daily routine. For example, you might consider the following.

- Lift free weights from a standing position instead of using a weight machine or bench. This combines balance and strength training.
- Do front and side-to-side lunges. These strengthen your legs, which is important for preventing falls, and might help you stay on your feet when you lunge in your next pickleball or tennis match.
- Work out on an unstable surface like a Bosu ball or a foam pad.
- Walk on uneven trails.
- Practice walking backward and shuffling side to side.
- Practice doing some activities with your eyes closed, after making sure you're in a safe spot.

Clements suggests adding balance challenges to everyday activities. Here are a few ideas to try:

- Train yourself to brush your teeth while standing on one leg, starting with a finger on the bathroom counter and your toe just above the floor.
- Squat upward, and then down, from a sturdy chair using your buttocks, not your back muscles.
- Do heel lifts while working at the kitchen sink.
- Walk an imaginary tightrope while you talk on the phone.

Beverly Connell, 56, a legal assistant in Atlanta, Georgia, has come up with her own methods to overcome a fear of falling that started in her 40s, after three bad stair falls. For years, she says, she avoided stairs entirely. But the former gymnast recently decided she needed to regain her courage and her balance. She started climbing stairs again and got herself a rebounder, a mini trampoline that comes with a safety bar.

The first time she used it, says Connell, "I literally almost fell off." These days, she says, she's jumping without "hanging on for dear life" and taking the stairs at the train station without gripping a rail.

As for O'Brien, she's studying to be a yoga instructor. She no longer feels like an old lady, she says, and thanks to her renewed balance and strength, "I don't need to be afraid of falling every minute."



By Kim Painter

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