

FINDING BALANCE AS WE AGE

Falls are common; injurious falls are feared and can be devastating. Every year one in three people over age 65 fall, and about one in five falls results in an injury. Nearly every person in the ACT study has had at least one fall! Most of these falls have, thankfully, not been life altering. Instead, they are a wake-up call. We can say to ourselves: "I was so fortunate that my fall didn't cause a hip fracture or concussion! Now let me see what I can do to minimize the chance of falling again." This is especially key since after one fall, the risk of falling again doubles!

Years of research have shown that the most effective part of a fall prevention program is regular exercise. But what kind of exercise works best?

The most important exercise is an exercise that you do regularly. Whatever you choose, make it a habit that becomes part of your regular routine.

With that motto in mind, consider the four types of exercise: endurance, strength, balance and flexibility. Endurance and balance exercises may be most important for falls prevention. Strength and flexibility exercises are also beneficial for age-related changes. All of these functions tend to decline with age, but the decline can be minimized or even reversed by regular exercise.

I've been really impressed by the way some of our ACT subjects have maintained great balance despite significant arthritis, osteoporosis, and other disabilities, by performing simple balance exercises regularly, such as the following:

- 1) The **balance walk exercise** involves having your arms outstretched, looking straight ahead, and then slowly walking in a straight line. As you walk, lift your back leg and pause for one second before stepping forward.
- 2) The **heel-to-toe walk exercise** involves placing one foot ahead of the other on a straight line, placing your heel just in front of the toe on the other foot. Twenty steps are recommended for both the **balance** and **heel-to-toe walk** exercises. You may need to start next to a wall or chair to steady yourself with one hand. Like anything in life, you will get better with practice!
- 3) Another exercise is the **stand-on-one-foot**

exercise. To do this, stand behind a sturdy chair or counter and hold on for balance, then stand on one foot. Hold this position for up to 10 seconds. Then do the same with the other leg. Repeat 10-15 times on each leg. You can start this exercise using both hands for support, graduating to one hand, then to one finger and then to no hands. If you're really steady, try doing this with your eyes closed.

- 4) Lastly, **Tai Chi** is a wonderful balance program that has been shown repeatedly to prevent falls in seniors. Check out a community center near you to find a group.

The key to any exercise program is "just do it". That said, it is wise to start slowly and consider getting help from a therapist or coach, or at your local senior center or "Y", especially if you're concerned about safety. Getting help may also help you become more confident over time and avoid getting discouraged.

Kaiser Permanente offers programs like "Silver&Fit" and "EnhanceFitness." These provide instructor-led classes in a social environment, with modifications for all levels. They can also mail you free kits to help you exercise at home. For information, call the Resource line at: 1-800-992-2279, or go online to: <https://wa.kaiserpermanente.org/html/public/services/fitness>.

The National Institute on Aging "Go4Life" website provides information, including exercise videos, to give you free and safe options for exercise anywhere at any fitness level: <https://go4life.nia.nih.gov>.

As a bonus, if you do some type of exercise regularly to work on endurance, strength, balance, and/or flexibility, you will also reduce your risk of dementia and other types of age-related decline, while staying healthy, or at least healthier, as you age.

JUST FOR FUN:

Question: Did you hear about the hungry clock?

Answer: It went back four seconds!

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