

ACT

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Keeping your balance in unsettling times

Albert Einstein may have said it best: “Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance, you must keep moving.” Without good balance, you’re at risk for falls. One in four people age 65 and older fall each year. One in five of those falls causes serious harm such as broken bones or a head injury.

Research shows that exercise focused on building strength and balance can reduce your risk. But what if all your routines for getting physical activity are suddenly interrupted? That’s what happened to most of us when the coronavirus pandemic started earlier this year. Most indoor exercise classes were cancelled. Even casual activities like shopping became curtailed. Walking outdoors is a great alternative. But with the weather changing, you may be reluctant to brave the elements.

So, what can you do right now to improve fitness and balance? Start by setting weekly goals based on what you find enjoyable. Then you can adjust those plans as they do or don’t meet your goals. The idea is to keep trying new things to find what works best for you.

Some folks are discovering the benefits of remote exercise sessions for older adults. Programs such as “Sit and Be Fit,” offer classes on PBS television stations, on DVD, and online (www.sitandbefit.org). You may also find free online videos for indoor walking, yoga, Pilates, and tai chi—the ancient Chinese practice of continuous, controlled, slow movement to improve physical and mental well-being.

Simply reminding yourself to sit less can be helpful. In a study conducted among older Kaiser Permanente Washington members with obesity, we found that wrist-worn alarms worked well to inspire people to take breaks from sitting. You might try setting an hourly timer on your kitchen stove or mobile phone to see if an alert could work for you. When the alarm

rings, take a few minutes to walk around inside or outside your home to help build balance and stamina.

You’re at highest risk for a fall when you walk around barefoot or in socks or stockings. Studies show that the best shoes for avoiding falls are those with laces or Velcro fasteners, adequate heel support, and non-slip soles—in other words, “tennis shoes.”

Assess your home for trip hazards, such as throw rugs and electrical cords. Do your rooms, stairs, and hallways have good lighting? Do you use night lights? Because many falls occur in the bathroom, install and use handrails or grab bars. If you’re unsteady while standing in your tub or shower, a shower chair can reduce your fall risk. Keep a pair of non-slip slippers handy to wear when going between the bathroom and your bedroom to avoid falls after bathing and when nature calls in the middle of the night.

Finally, many medications can cause balance problems. This includes prescription drugs for high blood pressure or chronic pain, as well as some antidepressants, anti-psychotics, anti-anxiety, and sleeping medications, especially benzodiazepines. Take medications only as directed, and notify your doctor if you experience dizziness, lightheadedness, or changes in your balance.

Although life may seem unsettling at times, it’s important to focus on what you can control to remain balanced, healthy, and resilient.

JUST FOR FUN:

Q: What does Charles Dickens keep in his spice rack?

A: The best of thymes, the worst of thymes.

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