

Improve Balance to Avoid Falls and Enhance Athletic Performance

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DENVER, CO — Falling down is no joke. Trips, slips, stumbles and other missteps among people over 65 lead to more than 2.3 million injuries, 662,000 hospitalizations and more than 20,000 deaths each year in the United States. One in three elderly adults fall each year, but they are not alone. One in five middle age adults (54-64) fall each year, and more than one in six young adults (21-45) fall each year.

Maintaining good balance can help reduce falls. In some cases, it can even help people become stable enough to reduce their use of canes and walkers. It can also improve athletic performance of recreational athletes.

“Balance is like muscle strength; it can gradually decline without a person noticing it,” said Lauren Ziemba, DPT, PT, physical therapist at National Jewish Health. “It also can improve with exercise.”

Test Yourself

The standard benchmark for good balance is standing on one foot for 30 seconds, preferably without weaving and waving around. A person who cannot do that is at increased risk for falling and should work on improving balance. But even those who can stand on one foot for 30 seconds benefit from improved balance. A 2011 review of past studies found that recreational athletes who added a balance training component to their regular exercise improved their vertical jump, agility, and downhill slalom skiing.

Ms. Ziemba suggests a graduated series of exercises to improve balance. Again, like muscle strengthening, it can take a few weeks to see noticeable improvement. But you will be safer and a potentially better skier if you stick with it.

Remember to practice these exercises in the corner of a room or next to a counter where you can easily catch yourself if your balance fails.

Side-by-Side

- Stand with two feet together side-by-side for 30 seconds
- With eyes closed, stand with two feet together side-by-side *with your eyes closed* for 30 seconds. (A very clear demonstration of the important role that vision plays in balance.)

Heel-to-Toe

- Stand heel-to-toe for 30 seconds, one time with your left foot in front and a second time with your right foot in front.
- With eyes closed, stand heel-to-toe for 30 seconds; one time with each foot in front.

One Foot

- Stand on one foot for 30 seconds. Both left and right feet.
- With eyes closed, stand on each foot for 30 seconds.

Additional Challenges

- At home, try the exercises standing on a pillow or couch cushion
- At the gym, stand on a BOSU ball.

- Try kneeling on an exercise ball.

These exercises can be relatively easy to incorporate into your daily life. If you work out regularly, just add a short balance component to each session. If not, you can incorporate it into your daily morning routine, or even during those stand-and-stare moments while you are brushing your teeth, or waiting for the microwave.

National Jewish Health is the leading respiratory hospital in the nation. Founded 123 years ago as a nonprofit hospital, National Jewish Health today is the only facility in the world dedicated exclusively to groundbreaking medical research and treatment of patients with respiratory, cardiac, immune and related disorders. Patients and families come to National Jewish Health from around the world to receive cutting-edge, comprehensive, coordinated care. To learn more, visit the [media resources page](#).

Media Contacts

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