FITNESS & EXERCISE

Can Exercise Help You Prevent a Fall?

The useful routine is simpler than it looks: practise balance, build strength, keep moving and know when to ask for help.

Step 1: Begin with an honest safety check

Perhaps you have started touching the wall as you walk down the hall. Perhaps an uneven pavement now gets more of your attention than the view. The instinct may be to move less, but the evidence points in another direction: practising balance and strength can improve the abilities that help keep you steady.

A 2019 systematic review examined eight trials involving 200 healthy adults over 65. Across several kinds of activity, balance measures improved by 16% to 42% from where participants began. The programmes included balance training, resistance and aerobic exercise, adapted physical activity and equipment-based activities. Meanwhile, balance performance worsened in groups that received no exercise intervention.

That finding is encouraging, but it needs careful wording. The review measured balance outcomes; it did not establish that every programme prevents every fall. The studies were small, with between nine and 61 participants, and the interventions varied considerably. Exercise can improve balance, and balance exercises may help prevent falls, but no routine can promise that you will not fall.

Before you begin, decide whether this is something you can safely explore alone. If you have trouble moving or balancing, have a disability that limits certain activities, live with a health problem, or worry that exercise may be unsafe, talk with your health care professional. That conversation should shape the type and amount of activity you choose.

Step 2: Practise balance with a suitable activity

Balance work is not simply ordinary movement under a new name. It asks you to practise stability and coordination. Tai chi and standing on one leg are examples; yoga and Pilates may also improve balance alongside strength and flexibility. The right choice is one that fits your present ability, rather than the activity that looks most impressive.

The review does not reveal one indispensable form of balance exercise. Several very different approaches produced improvements, which suggests that the useful question is not whether

you own specialist equipment. It is whether your chosen activity actually challenges balance in a way that is appropriate for you.

Your body adapts to the activity it does regularly, so practice matters. You can begin slowly instead of forcing a dramatic first session. Small amounts of movement can still be helpful, and building up gradually may help you improve without pushing too hard all at once. Showing up regularly matters more than making one attempt unusually difficult.

Enjoyment is practical, not frivolous. You are more likely to continue with an activity you like. That might mean tai chi, yoga or another suitable balance-focused class rather than solitary practice. If accountability helps, exercising with a friend or joining a group can make it easier to keep returning.

The first useful move is the one you can make safely-and repeat.

Step 3: Add strength with body weight or resistance

Balance is only one part of staying steady. Strength exercises use weights, resistance bands or your own body weight to build stronger muscles. Activities that make you push or pull against resistance may improve both strength and balance, while work for the ankles, feet and lower legs may be particularly useful for balance.

Your core-the muscles of your abdomen, back and hips-also contributes to balance and stability. This is why a fall-prevention approach should not become a single repeated balance pose. A combination of balance and strengthening activity addresses more than one physical ability involved in moving confidently.

Aerobic movement belongs in the wider picture too. Walking, dancing, swimming and cycling increase breathing and heart rate and improve overall fitness. The 2019 review included both aerobic and resistance approaches among the varied programmes that improved balance outcomes. It did not prove that one particular mode was best, so there is no evidence here for crowning a single perfect workout.

Flexibility work can help joints move more easily and improve posture, but it should not displace the parts doing the most relevant work. For this goal, balance practice and strength work are central. Aerobic and flexibility activities can complete a broader routine without pretending that every kind of exercise serves exactly the same purpose.

Step 4: Put a resistance band beside your calendar

A good intention becomes more useful when it has a place in your week. Choose one balance

activity you can realistically do and one form of strengthening that fits your ability. Then put them in your calendar. Specific, written plans can be easier to follow than the vague promise to "exercise more."

You do not need elaborate equipment. A resistance band is one supported option for strength work, while some exercises use your own body weight. If you prefer guidance or feel uncertain, a fitness or community centre may offer classes and staff support. The important difference is not between expensive and cheap equipment; it is between a plan that suits you and one you abandon.

Pay attention to what happens while you move. If you develop pain, extreme shortness of breath or dizziness, stop and seek help right away. If balancing itself feels unsafe, do not turn that fear into a private experiment. Ask a health care professional to help you choose an activity that matches your health and current ability.

On Monday, take a calendar and write down the balance activity you have chosen. Place a resistance band where it will remind you of the strength part of the plan. If you are not confident that either is safe, use that calendar entry to arrange a conversation with your health care professional instead. The first useful move is the one you can make safely-and repeat.

Where this comes from

- Exercise and Physical Fitness

  MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine · https://medlineplus.gov/exerciseandphysicalfitness.html
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