

## Improving Your Balance

Balance is often something that we take for granted and adjust to as it changes over time. But balance, like any other physical system, can be improved with proper practice. Some may ask why it matters. An article in [Core Physical Therapy](#) in February 2018 lists a number of reasons.

1. Reduction in pain – improving your balance works muscles groups that normally don't get a good workout, can lead to improved posture which in turn lessens back pain and decreases risk of arthritis.
2. Reduction in injuries – it can help people of all ages in preventing falls and in reducing injury due to falls by landing in a way that does less damage. (The CDC reports 2.8 million people treated in ER departments each year for injuries related to falls).
3. Leads to longer life – falls are the leading cause of injury and death for older Americans, reduce falls and live longer.
4. Move more gracefully, improve agility, reaction and athletic performance. That all sounds good. So how do you know if you need to improve your balance and how do you do that?

A recent article in [The BetterPT Blog](#) covered how to test your balance at home. They offer 5 easy-to-complete tests.

1. Stand with your feet touching side by side and close your eyes: You should be able to stand for > 30 seconds without swaying or losing your balance. Balance and posture go hand in hand. Proper body alignment can help prevent excess strain on your joints, muscles, and spine.
2. Stand with your feet one foot in front of the other and close your eyes: You should be able to stand for > 30 seconds without swaying or losing your balance.
3. Stand and reach forward with outstretched arms as far as you can while standing: You should be able to reach forward confidently 10 inches without losing your balance.
4. Stand on one leg: You should be able to stand for > 30 seconds without swaying or losing your balance. If you're close to this goal, great!
5. Stand on one leg and close your eyes: You should be able to stand for > 20 seconds without swaying or losing your balance.

They say the ability to complete even one or two of these tests successfully is a great place to start. However, if you have trouble they suggest you consider proactively working on your balance (and they suggest considering finding a good physical therapist to help). Balance is a system just like strength or flexibility, and you need to practice and challenge it in order to improve. You can repeat any of the tests above as exercises, or try the exercises below recommended by a March 2020 article on The Presbyterian Senior Living website.

1. Standing On One Foot – do this as often as you like
  - a) Stand on one foot behind a sturdy chair, holding on with 2 hands for balance.
  - b) Hold position for up to 10 seconds.
  - c) Repeat 10-15 times on each leg.

When you are able, try holding on to the chair with only one hand, then one finger, then no hands at all, then with your eyes closed.

2. Leg Raises – do this strength exercise no more than 3 times per week

Use a chair for support, then lift one leg straight back, keeping the supporting leg bent. Hold for a second, then repeat up to 15 times. Change to the other leg. The back leg raise will build strength in the buttocks and lower back. The side leg version primarily works the buttocks, thighs and hips. To do this, stand behind a chair and lift one leg to the side. Make sure the back stays straight and the toes remain facing forward. Bend the supporting leg. Hold for around one second, repeating 15 times, then move on to the other leg.

Good luck.

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