

INSPIRED

To Make Healthy Choices

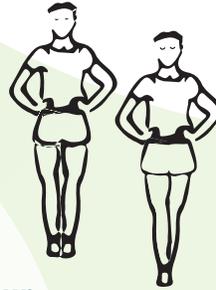
Our bodies are amazing. Every day they complete comprehensive functions and complex tasks without us giving it much thought much less appreciation.

Our balance is one of these very complex tasks relying on numerous feedback mechanisms. **Balance is the ability to maintain our center of gravity over our base of support.** When we're standing up, our legs are our base of support. The wider our legs are, the wider our base is and the easier it is to balance.

Our vision provides visual orientation, playing a major role in helping maintain balance. **Our ears aid in balance through the vestibular system,** made of several structures and canals in the inner ear. Fluid and hairs in the canals help detect a variety of body movements, sending signals to the brain that help orient us and maintain balance by monitoring rotation and side to side movements of the head, while also detecting gravity.

Our skin, muscles and joints also play a crucial role in balancing the body by telling our brain where the body is in space, a sense called proprioception. The receptors, such as those on the bottom of the feet or along the back, are sensitive to pressure or stretching sensations. Receptors in the neck can tell the brain which way the head is turned and receptors in the ankles can tell the brain how the body is moving relative to the ground. The touch system is especially useful in maintaining balance while engaging in sports and other activities that involve a great deal of movement. When a police officer asks a driver to touch his or her nose as part of a sobriety test, the officer is testing the driver's proprioception. People who are impaired by alcohol or other drugs may fail the test because their brains have difficulty determining the position of their limbs relative to their noses.

Not having a good balance increases the risk for falls, injuries from falls and lowers the quality of life since it limits what you can do. How can you tell if you have good balance? Try these three moves to test your balance.



On both feet: Stand with feet together, ankle bones touching, and arms folded across chest; then close your eyes. Have someone time you. Though it's normal to sway a little, you should be able to stand for 60 seconds without moving your feet. Next, place one foot directly in front of the other and close your eyes. You should be able to stand for at least 38 seconds on both sides.

On one foot: Stand on one foot and bend other knee, lifting non-supporting foot off floor without letting it touch standing leg. Do it in a doorway so you can grab the sides if you start to fall. Repeat with eyes closed. People age 60 and younger can typically hold the pose for about 29 seconds with their eyes open, 21 seconds with their eyes closed. People age 61 and older: 22 seconds with eyes open, 10 seconds with eyes closed.



On ball of foot: Stand on one foot with hands on hips, and place non-supporting foot against inside knee of standing leg. Raise heel off floor and hold the pose—you should be able to do so for 25 seconds.



Practicing the above is a great way to improve your balance. Other ways include taking tai chi or dance classes, doing strength-training or flexibility exercises or strengthening the core and lower-body muscles which will keep you steadier on your feet.

Balance gets worse with age. As we age, the length of our stride shortens, the pace of our steps slows, and vision, critical to coordination, becomes fuzzier. All of these greatly impact our balance. People are often unaware that their coordination is slipping.

Balance is a separate system, just like strength or flexibility. You can improve it if you continue to challenge it.

For more information:
BALANCE
 www.guideinc.org

Balance gets worse with age.

You can improve your balance if you continually challenge it.

One-third (33%) of American adults over age 65 experience a fall each year.

Dizziness and loss of balance may be side effects of some medications. Talk to your doctor.

