

## Balance & Flexibility Exercise – For Safety & Independence

**Balance exercises** help prevent a common problem in older adults: falls. Falling is a major cause of broken hips and other injuries that often lead to disability and loss of independence. Some balance exercises build up your leg muscles; others require you to do simple activities like briefly standing on one leg.

### About Strength/Balance Exercises

Any of the lower-body exercises for strength that are performed standing are also balance exercises. They include exercises such as heel raises, hamstring curls, hip extension, and side leg raise. Also do the knee-extension exercise, which helps you keep your balance by increasing muscle strength in your upper thighs. Just doing these exercises will improve your balance.



### Progressing

Typically, these exercises are preformed while holding onto a table or chair for balance. To challenge your balance further, hold onto the table/chair with only one hand. As you progress, try holding on with only one fingertip. Next, try these exercises without holding on at all. If you are very steady on your feet, move on to doing the exercises using no hands, with your eyes closed. Have someone stand close by if you are unsteady.

### Anytime/Anywhere

These following types of exercises also improve your balance. You can do them almost anytime, anywhere, and as often as you like, as long as you have something sturdy nearby to hold onto if you become unsteady:

- Walk heel-to-toe. Position your heel just in front of the toes of the opposite foot each time you take a step. Your heel and toes should touch or almost touch.
- Stand on one foot while waiting in line at the grocery store. Alternate feet.
- Stand up and sit down without using your hands.



**Flexibility exercises** help keep your body limber by stretching your muscles and the tissues that hold your body's structures in place. Flexibility also may play a part in preventing falls. Stretching exercises give you more freedom of movement to do the things you need to do and the things you like to do. Stretching exercises alone can improve your flexibility, but they will not improve your endurance or strength.

### How Much, How Often?

- The most current exercise recommendations for older adults advise performing flexibility exercises a **minimum** of twice per week for 10 minutes to **maintain** flexibility. To improve flexibility, perform stretching exercises at least three times a week, for at least 20 minutes each session.
- Always warm up before stretching exercises (do them after endurance or strength exercises, for example; or, if you are doing only stretching exercises on a particular day, do a little bit of easy walking and arm-pumping first). Stretching your muscles before they are warmed up may result in injury.
- Do each stretching exercise 3 to 5 times at each session.
- Slowly stretch into the desired position, as far as possible without pain, and hold the stretch for 10 to 30 seconds. Relax, then repeat, trying to stretch farther.
- Stretching should never cause pain, especially joint pain. If it does, you need to reduce the stretch so that it doesn't hurt. Mild discomfort or a mild pulling sensation is normal.
- Never "bounce" into a stretch; make slow, steady movements instead. Jerking into position can cause muscles to tighten, possibly resulting in injury.
- Your arms and legs should be straight when you stretch them, but don't lock them in a tightly straight position. You should always have a very small amount of bending in your joints while stretching.



For examples of safe and beneficial strength/balance and flexibility exercises, go to the following website address:  
<http://www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation/Publications/ExerciseGuide/chapter04.htm>

**Note:** Consult your physician before starting an exercise program and/or if you have or are at risk for a chronic health condition (e.g., diabetes, hypertension). If you have had a hip replacement, check with your surgeon before doing lower body exercises.