

# Taking the fall – out of your life



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## Why so serious?

By Julie Cheney, RN

Falls are some of the most dangerous things that can happen to people in their later years. Falls account for a significant number of hospitalisations. They can also lead to serious injury such as broken hips and other bones. The impact of falls, regardless of fractures causes serious pain for prolonged periods and can reduce a person's confidence in their abilities and their desires to go out and move about. Falls are a focus in all health settings and particularly where older people are cared for, because health personnel are all taught awareness of falls prevention. But prevention of falls and their possible resultant injuries should also be on your mind as an older person. What are you doing to reduce falls for yourself? What do you know about it? Are you being realistic about your ability to move as freely as you could a decade ago?

The start point is to understand the changes to your balance and your bones. Then consider the areas that you move about within. That is the environments, the tasks you have to perform and the activities you like to do, and how you can make adjustments to minimise the risks related to falls.

Your decisions to reduce risks now could be the difference between independence and hospital, or full-time care.

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## Taking the fall – out of your life

### What about balance?

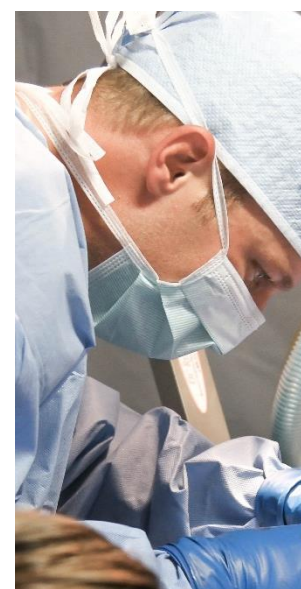
Maintaining balance is a complex interaction of bones, muscles, the structures your ears, your brain functions and your vision. We are designed to do this very well, for the most part. As we age, however, those structures are prone to getting a bit worn and a bit slower for a lot of us. The messages that once got to the brain about where your body is situated in space might be slower, and the way your muscles react when a message is sent to change position might also be much slower.

One of the most significant things you can do to prevent falls is to improve your strength and your balance. We're not talking about going to a gym, necessarily, and lifting great weights. We're talking about simple exercises that are targeted to you and your abilities to help increase strength in the core muscles that allow you to stand upright and to respond to changes in balance. Then there are ones to help your body 'remember' how to perceive its position and respond to changes in balance.

Balance is often an area that physiotherapists focus on if an older person is at risk of falls. They can perform comprehensive assessments on how you move, your strengths and issues with moving about your environment. They can then give you exercises to help your increase strength and balance.

Prevention also includes removing hazards. These are things you can slip on, trip over, fall off or get tangled in. We have some more details in the checklist at the end of this issue.

***“Balance is a delicate and complex arrangement of interactions between body systems”***





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### A few ideas

Regular walking is of course the gold standard exercise because it's doing what our bodies are designed for. Thinking about your posture and facing forward with your chin tucked in will help make walking a valuable addition to your balance support.

There are many exercises possible for balance improvement. As examples, we have used the Clinical Excellence Commission's NSW Falls Prevention Program as a guide. We offer just a few for you here and strongly advise seeking support for a full prevention program.

You can access the stated program at this web address:

[https://www.activeandhealthy.nsw.gov.au/assets/pdf/Falls\\_Prevention\\_Home\\_Exercises.pdf](https://www.activeandhealthy.nsw.gov.au/assets/pdf/Falls_Prevention_Home_Exercises.pdf)

Balance exercises include movements which create smaller surfaces on which to balance, like raising your heels off the ground or walking heel to toe with feet close together. This forces your brain and muscles to work together to 'remember' how to keep balance when a foot or leg is off the ground and when your whole body is moving up and down.

Strength exercises also have balance components but focus on the big muscle groups. These are around the pelvis, thighs, bottom and your core in the lower abdomen and back to keep your back in the right position. These might include 90° knee raises and lifting your leg to the side as good examples of balance and strengthening working together. Sitting to standing upright several times and straight leg raises for your thigh muscles work with your core and on strength. If you are able, stepping up and down a step is a great combination of all of these.



### At Later Years Support

We endeavor to provide useful, practical ways to support people in their later years, and their families. We utilise current evidence where possible, reputable health related sources and decades of experience with older people to guide our information. We offer suggestions that are general in nature and do not attempt to cover all needs of all people, or to be considered the only advice sought for a person's concerns. We recommend everyone seeks professional advice in any circumstance of complex health and wellbeing concerns.



## A checklist to guide you

|                          |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <p>Minimise clutter in the areas you use all the time.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Keep wide walkways through furniture.</li> </ul>  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <p>Consider using a walking aid (stick or wheeled walker) outside at home, in public places and particularly in crowds.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- You might also find a wheelchair in big public spaces reduces fatigue, risks and helps you enjoy your outing more.</li> </ul>    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <p>Set up the areas you use all the time to be easy to use and work in, such as bringing high things lower and not packing things deep into cupboards.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Avoid heavy lifting all together as you can easily overbalance.</li> </ul>                        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <p>Remove and/or adapt loose mats.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- At least have mats that are stiffer and have low pile.</li> <li>- Add slip reduction devices to mats.</li> </ul>  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <p>Minimise things that stick out and things that catch on clothing.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- bedspreads folds and furniture with protruding parts often catch on legs.</li> <li>- shoes the don't fit well or are broken</li> <li>- Electrical cords across walkways.</li> </ul> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <p>Have rails installed in high risk areas such as bathrooms and entryways. (You might even consider a ramp instead of steps.)</p>  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <p>Use chairs that are raised or easy to get in and out of.</p>   |

### IN SUMMARY

1. Falls cause harm to health and wellbeing.
2. Balance can change with age.
3. Simple exercises can support maintaining balance and strength.
4. Safety strategies in the home and outside will reduce the risks, so you can enjoy your life more.
5. Be safe and give yourself the best chance at staying in one piece.