

IMPROVE *your* BALANCE



How long can you stand on one leg? Your answer could reveal a lot about the state of your health, says Lindyl Crabb

Many of us take balance for granted, but staying on your feet requires a lot more effort than you think. To balance well many parts of your body and senses must work together harmoniously, says physiotherapist John Miller from Physio Works.

"Your balance system relies on information from your eyes, inner ear and proprioceptors – sensors on your joints, muscles and skin that send feedback to your brain to coordinate each body part," explains Miller.

Ageing can affect balance. You may notice you stumble more often or rely on handrails. And if left unchecked, Miller says, poor balance can lead to back pain and falls. It can also be a sign of other serious health issues – not being able to stand on one leg for at least 20 seconds may indicate you're at an increased risk of stroke and brain disease.

The good news is that challenging your proprioceptors can help you improve your strength, coordination and balance. Here's how to incorporate these balance exercises into your daily routine.



PRACTISE AT HOME

Start by standing on one leg for as long as you can – do this near a kitchen bench or doorframe if you need support. Once you're confident with this, Miller advises standing on one leg on a cushion while you brush your teeth. Next, try turning your head from side to side, hop three times and then rebalance. When this begins

to feel easy try doing it with your eyes closed. Without sight your proprioceptors must work harder.

TRY TAI CHI

Regularly practising this Chinese martial art can significantly enhance your balance. Based on a series of postures combined with graceful movements, tai chi boosts coordination, leg



strength and stability, says Master Han Jin Song from Tai Chi Australia. "Each movement is performed very slowly which requires concentration," he explains. "To execute a movement, the mind and body must work together."

Tai chi involves one-legged balances but if you're not confident enough to try them the controlled footwork is just as beneficial.

GO BAREFOOT

Your feet are one of your biggest sensory points – the ligaments, muscles and soles detect pressure and movement which keeps you aware of your body and your environment. Wearing shoes dampens these signals which can affect stability, but this can be fixed, says sports science expert Dr Patrick O. McKeon. "Going barefoot can improve our ability to move, balance and sense where we are," he explains. To prevent pain and allow your feet time to adjust, Dr McKeon recommends taking it slow.

... OR GO BARRE

This style of exercise improves your balance by combining the flexibility of yoga, the strength of Pilates and the grace of ballet. "Barre focuses on core stability which is the foundation of balance, and targets the smaller, supportive muscles which aid it," explains Emma Seibold, founder of Barre Body. Classes involve performing postures on one leg, and if you're a beginner you can hold onto the barre for support. To boost your balance Seibold advises doing three to four classes a week.

TAKE UP YOGA

To increase your range of movement and build stability, join a yoga class. "Yoga helps us find our centre and core strength so we can move with confidence and control," says Zen Ki Yoga teacher Janie Larmour. "It also helps us evenly distribute our weight through our feet which is vital for balance."

To improve your balance, try a tree pose. Standing on your right leg, bend your left leg and place the left foot against the inside of your right leg. Then slide left foot up right leg while maintaining balance. Hold the pose and place your hands in prayer position in front of your chest. Repeat on opposite side.

Larmour recommends three or four weekly yoga sessions, but doing it once a week still gets results.



START SWIMMING

Swimming challenges muscle strength which is essential for good balance, says Dr Dafna Merom from the School of Science and Health at Western Sydney University. "Swimming is a very coordinated movement that challenges large muscle groups. Some evidence suggests that by building your trunk, core and leg strength, this activity could prevent falls," she says.

In fact, according to Dr Merom's research, doing laps is more effective than playing golf when it comes to reducing your risk of falls.

TEST YOUR BALANCE

To find out how good your balance is, Miller suggests taking this test. If you struggle to complete the exercises your balance may need work.

- ⌚ Stand on one leg with eyes closed for more than 10 seconds.
- ⌚ Stand heel to toe, with heel of left foot directly in front of toe of right foot. Keep eyes closed and hold for more than 30 seconds.
- ⌚ Turn 360 degrees each way in under 4 seconds.
- ⌚ Place one foot on a step then back down on the ground eight times, in less than 20 seconds. Repeat on other foot. ⌚