

What is Gait and Balance Training?

The human gait pattern is defined as the way people walk and balance. This gait pattern is responsible for our ability to maintain an upright posture. In older adults, proper gait and good balance are essential in performing the normal activities of daily living – one of the most important of these being walking. In addition, gait and balance training is extremely important in fall prevention. Balance is the ability of the body to quickly respond to a situation, such as an uneven walking surface, and to safely right itself. The components of the balance system include the visual system (eyes and head), the vestibular system (the inner ear) and the somatosensory system (the skin, muscles, joints and nerves). Gait and balance exercises are used to challenge and improve all of these systems.

What Can Gait and Balance Training Do For Me

• Improve Posture

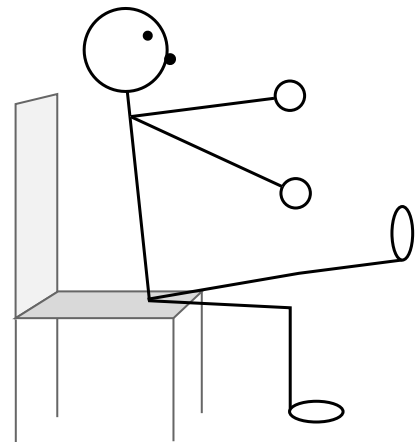
The nature of human beings is to adapt. This means that if we are aware of good posture and use our muscles correctly all our lives, we maintain good posture. But if we slouch or walk with more weight on one foot or the other because of a bunion, we adjust to that poor posture just as easily. Over time, these posture deviations become our “normal” posture. Gait and balance exercises help to realign and readjust the three body systems: visual, vestibular and muscle/joint.

• Reduce Risk of Falling

Surprisingly, there is a strong link between muscle mass (or lack of it) in older adults and the incidence of falls and balance problems. Strength training (see Strength Training Handout) plays a vital role in improving balance. In addition, the following exercises safely challenge the vestibular, visual and muscle and joint systems in order to improve performance. Remember, balance is not innate. It is learned (think about a toddler learning to walk) and must be challenged on a regular basis.

• Improve or Maintain Independence

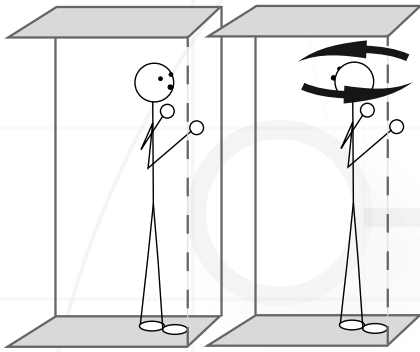
The most common risk factor for a fall is the fear of falling. Older adults often develop changes in gait in response to this fear with a wider stance and smaller steps. These adaptive behaviors can result in negative physical, psychological or social changes. In other words, we may lose confidence and with it the freedom and drive to participate in the activities of daily living. Balance and gait training can help to increase confidence and maintain the independence older adults strive for.



What Types of Gait and Balance Exercises Should I Do?

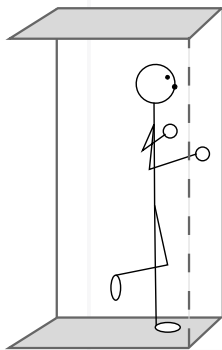
Here are four simple gait and balance exercises that you can do at home.

- Perform each of exercise once or twice daily.
- Make sure you have a support (a wall, chair or desk) within easy reach.



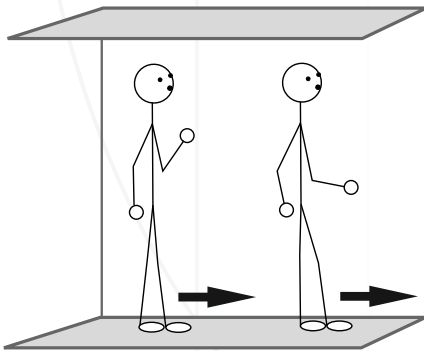
Two-Leg Balance

- Stand facing the corner of a room so you can touch a wall with each hand.
- Stand with feet hip width, hands on or near the wall.
- Quickly glance from one side to the other with a 2-second pause between repetitions – repeat 6-8 times.



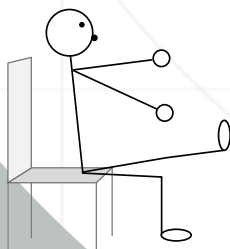
1-Leg Balance

- Stand facing the corner of a room so you can touch a wall with each hand.
- Stand on one leg with hands on or near wall for support.
- Hold as long as you can without the other foot touching the ground.
- Work toward one minute on each leg.



Heel/Toe Walking

- Walk alongside a wall or counter.
- Place the heel of one foot in front of the toe of the other foot: heel to toe.
- Look forward, not at your feet.
- Walk the length of the wall 6-8 times.



Hip Stabilization

- Sit on the front edge of a sturdy chair.
- Lean back slightly and lift one leg straight out in front of your body.
- Hold for 20-30 seconds.
- Repeat with other leg.