

Better balance

Maintaining strength later in life can be an enormous challenge, but with the right kind of balance training, you can build stability and prevent slips and falls. Here's why it's never too late to begin.

Words **KAREN BURGE**

WHEN INTERNATIONAL MUSIC star Sir Elton John was taken to hospital after a slip at his French villa a few months ago, it was a reminder of the risks that come as we age. While the 76-year-old was discharged after a short precautionary stay, it followed a more serious fall requiring surgery in 2021.

Like Sir Elton's recent accident, an analysis of falls that resulted in a hospital admission by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare found that most had occurred in our own homes, with tripping, slipping or stumbling on a single-level surface the biggest cause.

Worryingly in Australia, around 30% of adults over the age of 65 will have at least one

fall each year, and the risk of ending up in hospital rises as we age, according to the NSW Falls Prevention Network. This is because of the changes that occur during the normal ageing process, such as poorer vision, reduced muscle mass and lower bone strength. Certain medications and health conditions can also play a role.

While we can't put the brakes on ageing, improving strength and balance can make a positive difference. The network says that exercise reduces the number of falls over time by around 23%, and 'high challenge' balance exercises can increase that benefit to up to 40%.

Best of all, it's never too late to start these exercises – and there's no expensive equipment you need to buy. >



FIT FOR (DAILY) LIFE

Building strong bodies for daily function is an area of interest for Sydney-based Sports and Exercise physiotherapist, Melinda Klarenaar. As well as seeing patients at her clinic, Melinda teaches group fitness classes at the local gym, where she's developed a stretch and stability class to boost balance and functional strength.

Many participants are aged over 50 and some have a history of falls or musculoskeletal problems, like arthritis, osteoporosis and joint replacement.

"I saw the need for a class that addresses flexibility and range of motion, strength, stability and balance for everyday functional tasks," explains Melinda. "It features all the exercises I usually give my patients for rehab, so it's virtually a big physiotherapy session."

Functional training involves exercise moves that you'd normally use in daily situations. "It's quite simple, really," she says. "You break down the everyday task

and repeat it over and over, then you increase the challenge, for example by adding a weight, changing the speed or increasing the depth of movement. It will then become easier and safer for you to do in real life."

This means greater mobility, less effort and a reduced risk of injury when doing tasks like loading groceries into the car, hanging up washing, lifting up grandkids or twisting to put on a seatbelt in the car.

Coming hand in hand with functional strength is balance work – because life doesn't always involve having two feet firmly on the ground!

BUILDING RESILIENCE

Balance is an area that requires special attention as you age. But the benefits are well worth the effort – particularly when it comes to reducing your risk of slips and stumbles. It involves practising actions while maintaining your centre of gravity over your base of support, explains

Melinda. That might sound easy enough but putting these moves into practice is where things may get a little wobbly.

"Balance gets more difficult as the base of support becomes smaller, such as when standing on one leg. You also need to keep your balance while you are moving, such as when you bend on one leg to pick something off the floor."

Shifting to a one-legged activity introduces new forces that the body must respond to, so even those who are quite fit and strong will feel the added challenge that balance exercises bring. While working on your balance you'll discover areas of weakness to focus on and you can easily track your improvement over time.

Melinda says strengthening, stability and balance exercises, particularly of the hips, knees, lower legs and ankles, can help you:

- Hold positions for longer, like sitting in a car or bending over to work in the garden.

- Get out of trouble more swiftly, such as manoeuvring when someone is about to bump into you.
- Respond quickly to changes in walking surfaces (like a kerb, tree root or uneven path) to avoid a fall.

It can also help make daily tasks easier and safer, like climbing stairs, raising the body after kneeling and picking something up from the floor.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

For one of Melinda's clients, Elizabeth, who is aged in her 60s, pain and hip weakness had led to poor balance, and she found herself walking slowly and with caution to avoid aches and instability. She relied on handrails for support while taking the stairs and used an armrest to get in and out of a chair.

Along with weekly physiotherapy sessions, Elizabeth attended Melinda's stretch and stability class and took on

AGEING HEALTH CONCERNS

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56% of over 50s say they are concerned about loss of mobility	47% worry about losing the ability to live independently	39% are concerned about accidents like falls
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an exercise program at home, including progressive balance exercises.

Within five-to-six weeks, she was able to get in and out of a chair without using the armrest and could use stairs with less effort. She felt stronger around her hip, experienced less pain and felt more confident walking without that fear of losing her balance.

Whether you're facing a physical setback like Elizabeth or looking to boost balance and strength as you age, there are some simple steps you can take each day to improve your wellbeing.

The best part is that you can do them in your own home and at your own pace. See our illustrated breakout (below) for some exercises to get you started. ●



5 EASY MOVES FOR BETTER BALANCE AND STABILITY

By MELINDA KLARENAAR

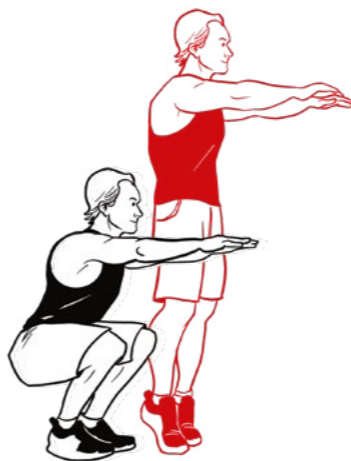
Perform these exercises four times a week (try not to miss two days in a row) or challenge yourself to do them daily.

TIP: Keep a chair nearby for your balance exercises to steady yourself if needed and remember to breathe normally (don't hold your breath!).



1. ONE LEG STANDING WITH LEG SWING

Stand tall on one leg. Swing other leg forward and backward gently at various speeds and try to maintain your steadiness. Do five swings then rest. Repeat five times each leg.



2. SQUAT TO TOE RISE

Stand with feet shoulder width apart. Pretend to sit in an invisible chair behind you and then stand up and rise onto your tippy toes with your arms in the air (or hold onto a chair, if needed). Hold this position on your tiptoes for five seconds then come back down. Repeat 10 times.



3. WEIGHT TRANSFER

Stand with your feet shoulder width apart. Practise taking your weight slowly from one leg to the other, holding on each side for five seconds. Keep your pelvis level (not tipped back or tucked too far under). Stand tall when you are balancing on one leg and try not to wobble. Transfer from one leg to the other 10 times.

Illustrations: Marcelo Baez.



4. HIGH KNEE MARCHING

Stand with your arms overhead and march slowly, bringing your knee up towards your chest. As you lift your knees up, draw in your abdominal (tummy) muscles gently and breathe normally. Do 20 marches. Rest 45 seconds and repeat two-three times.



5. ONE LEG STANDING WITH PASS-AROUND

Stand tall on one leg and hold an object (for example, a can of soup). While standing on one leg, pass the object around your body slowly (pass from behind your back to the other hand and around to the front). Reverse the direction. Try not to wobble. Repeat 10 pass-arounds on each leg.