

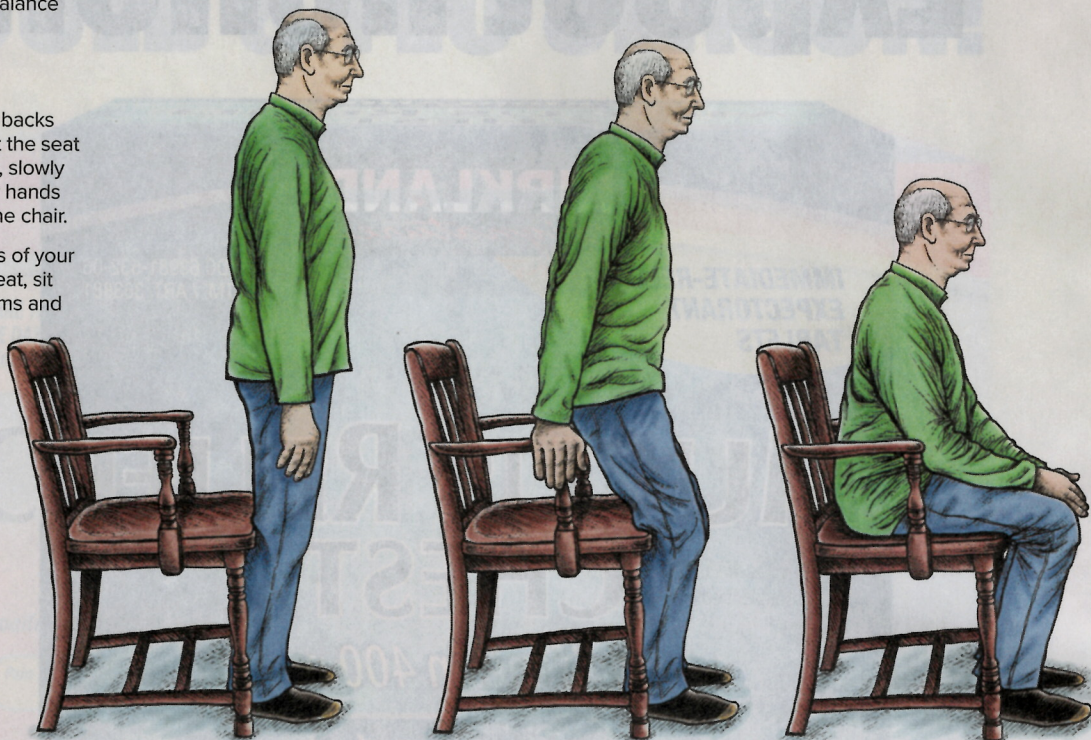
## Easy exercise

Standing from a chair is a good exercise for balance and strength.

## Sitting

- Standing with the backs of both legs against the seat of a chair with arms, slowly start to sit until your hands touch the arms of the chair.

- Keeping the backs of your legs touching the seat, sit down using your arms and legs for control.



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# Avoiding a fall

With proper balance work, falling does not have to be a part of aging

by GEORGE LOCKER

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), more than one in four seniors fall each year—that's millions of people over the age of 65. And, one out of every five falls causes a broken bone or head injury. By every measure, falling down is serious and costly.

It's also preventable. The National Council on Aging states that falling is not a normal part of aging. Loss of balance in later life may be common, but it is not inevitable.

I am 71 years old and have studied tai chi as a martial art for over 40 years. I am more stable than ever. My first teacher taught into his 80s. My second teacher and my classmates are my age. In the Adirondacks, close to where I live, some of the best backcountry skiing and hiking guides are seniors. These activities all require balance.

## Balance and imbalance

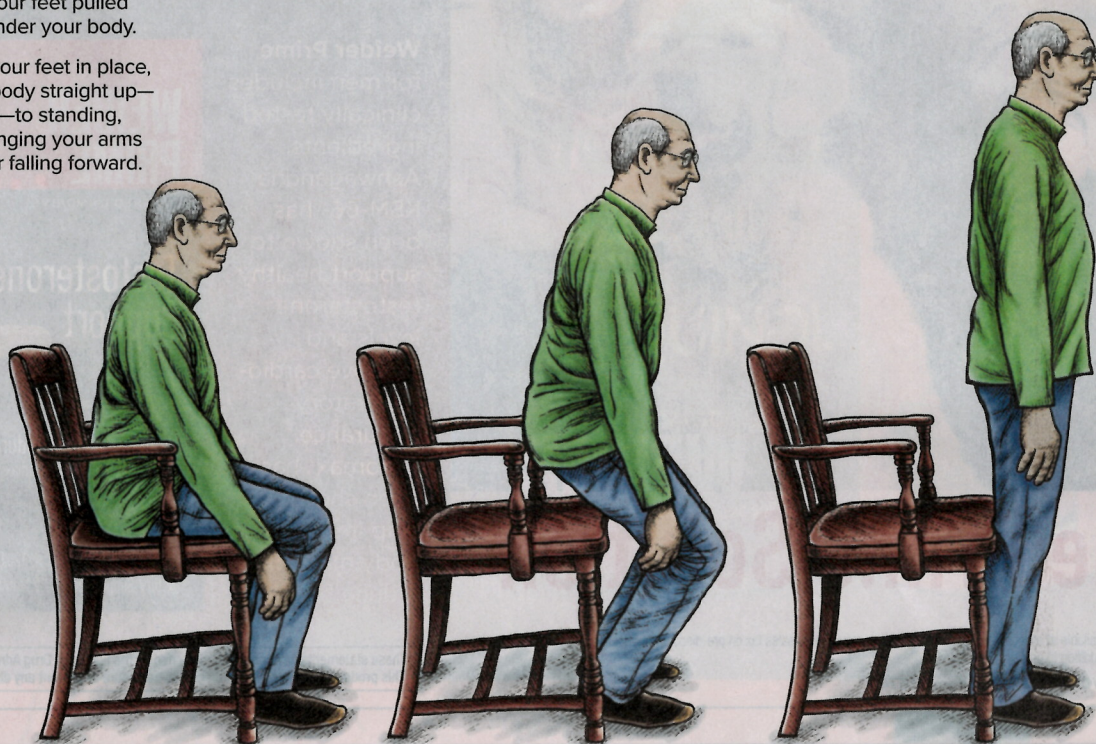
What exactly is balance? It is the rapid and automatic response by your postural or "balance" muscles to the sensation of imbalance. In short, balance is something you have, not something you do.

Common imbalance begins in midlife. For many active and otherwise healthy middle-



## Rising

- Sit on the front edge of the chair with your feet pulled back and under your body.
- Keeping your feet in place, push your body straight up—not forward—to standing, without swinging your arms and torso or falling forward.



aged individuals, their largest muscle groups—the quadriceps (thighs) and the gluteus (buttocks)—noticeably shrink from disuse. Over time, and with too much sitting, diminished balance muscles forget how to balance.

## Focused exercises

Maintaining or restoring balance requires physical effort. Fortunately, balance-focused exercises and sports can be fun, and what's more, they work.

Balance sports are characterized by a sustained bent knee and ankle position. When you stand with bent knees and ankles, the postural muscles, not the bones, hold the body erect. Holding a weight-bearing posture teaches your postural muscles how to balance your body. So, some exercises and sports have less impact on balance than others.

For example, walking on an even surface, while a wonderful and healthy lifetime activity, is not a balance exercise any more than standing is. Hiking on an uneven surface, on the other hand, with the knees and ankles bent, is weight-bearing and does improve balance.

Other balance activities include ice-skating, roller-skating, skateboarding, snowboarding, downhill and cross-country skiing, wave surfing, stand-up paddleboarding, tai chi as a martial art and qi gong standing exercises such as Zhan Zhuang.

## Carry that weight

Weight-bearing sports bring other unanticipated health benefits. Older women especially are at risk of bone density loss, leading to osteoporosis and its consequences. When the bones are mildly stressed, they produce cells and become denser. Exercise also stimulates the bones to produce a range of hormones that help to regulate memory, appetite, muscle health, fertility, metabolism and other body functions in men and women.

It is never too early to work on your balance. Find a weight-bearing exercise or sport that you like. Practice every day for 30 minutes as if your future balance depends on it. Because it does.

And, if you are a senior with balance issues, do weight-bearing exercises twice a day for a total of 60 minutes. Balance improves with effort. Go for it! ■

## Getting started

To improve balance, slowly implement exercises, from beginning to advanced. Try this to start, timing how long you can stand on each leg and increasing the time each day:

- Stand perpendicular to and at arm's length from a wall with your legs comfortably spread apart.
  - Move the foot farthest from the wall to touch the foot closest to the wall. Continue to support your weight equally on each leg when your feet touch.
  - Bend the knee of the inner leg and press the ball of your foot into the ground.
  - Slowly lift the heel of the foot farther from the wall until only the big toe is touching the ground for balance. Feel how all your body weight is now supported by your bent inner leg.
  - Hold this position for as long as you are able.
  - Do this on both sides.
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