Article Series Staying Active All

Feeling unsteady? Six exercises to improve your balance

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Having good balance is important for walking and many other activities you do every day. During cancer treatment, you may experience impaired balance and changes in your body’s ability to sense its movements and actions. Although you may be experiencing symptoms like fatigue, resting too much can lead to weak muscles and reduced range of motion in your body.

Doing regular exercise can keep your muscles from weakening and help improve your balance, which can lower your risk of falls and broken bones. Older adults may especially benefit from balance exercises, according to the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans (PAGA) from the US Department of Health & Human Services.

Sami Mansfield, the founder of Cancer Wellness for Life, shares a few simple exercises to help strengthen your muscles and increase your balance.

Build a stronger posture

Start by adjusting your posture either in a seated or standing position. This means sitting or standing up with your back straight and your shoulders back. Follow these steps to safely and effectively engage your muscles for core strength and stability.

- Step 1: Pull your shoulders back by trying to touch your shoulder blades together. Let your arms hang naturally to allow for this movement. Stay like this for a count of 10, trying to not hold your breath. Relax and repeat
- Step 2: From a seated position, adjust your posture, then “march” one leg and opposite arm up and switch sides. Marching is the seated version of walking, where you lift one leg (bent knee) with the opposing arm
- Step 3: If you feel confident standing, adjust your posture and then take 10 steps forward, trying to keep this posture. Stand near a countertop, wall or back of a couch for support. As you walk, gaze 5-10 feet in front of you instead of down at your feet. Move your body toward where your eyes are focused. Try to avoid looking down
- Step 4: Next, turn and return to the starting position. This movement engages all of the main muscles required for balance

Try these six exercises to help improve your balance

Begin by completing each exercise 10 times, once a day. As you feel stronger and more able, do each movement a few more times. Work your way up to three sets of 15 repetitions for each exercise. You can complete these at one time or spread them out through the day.

1. Ankle Pumps—Either sitting or lying down, lift your toes in an upward direction. Pause and return to a relaxed position. Repeat. You can do this exercise one foot at a time, or work on both sides together

2. Heel Raises—Beginners, start this exercise seated. If you are more confident with your posture, you can do this exercise standing up, using a wall or countertop if you need support. Adjust your posture, then place your feet directly under your knees and lift your heels, either one at a time or together. Pause in the fully raised position and slowly lower your heels. You will feel a tightening in your calf muscle, the back of the lower part of your leg
3. Leg Lift—This exercise can be done in a seated or standing position. Keeping your knee in a bent position, lift it up toward the ceiling. Imagine there is a string around the knee that is being pulled toward the shoulder. Try to not rock your body to bring the leg up. Complete all repetitions on one side, then try the other side
4. Steady Feet—This exercise should be done standing up. Make sure you are standing near a firm place of support, such as a chair or countertop. First adjust to strong posture, then bring your feet close together, holding this position for 10-30 seconds. As you feel stronger in this position, move one foot forward, and adjust your weight to the center of your feet. You will feel like you are in mid-step. As you get stronger, work on looking side to side as you stand in this foot position
5. Side-to-Side Walk—This exercise should be done standing with strong posture facing a countertop. As you continue to look forward, take five steps to your right side, and then return back to the starting position. Continue for 10 cycles in each direction
6. Sit to Stand—Start by sitting at the edge of a sturdy chair with your feet hip-width apart. If you are just beginning to exercise, start with a chair that has arms. Begin by placing your arms on the sides of the chair or your thighs, and push through your heels to stand up. You can use your arms to help, but as you get stronger, place your arms in front of you so that your legs are doing the work. Pause when you are fully standing up to pull your shoulder blades back, and squeeze in your belly. Slowly lower yourself back down to the chair and repeat

Try to fit balance training into your daily routine—several of the exercises above can be completed while lying in bed, as a passenger in a car or while waiting for a doctor’s appointment. Start with working on your balance for five minutes each day and work your way up from there.

The information contained herein is provided for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace discussions with a healthcare provider. Talk to your doctor if you are experiencing any worsening changes in balance, if you are having any

numbness or pain in your hands, feet or shoulders or if you have fallen. All decisions about your health and exercise routine should be made with a healthcare provider.

Sami Mansfield is an oncology exercise specialist and Director of Oncology Wellness for one of the largest cancer centers in the Midwest. She is also the founder of Cancer Wellness for Life, an organization focused on developing oncology wellness and exercise resources for hospital and healthcare organizations, nonprofits and individuals affected by cancer.