

Staying Steady: Everyday Strategies to Maintain Balance as You Age

Community Health FCS Leader Lesson

Developed by:

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Time Needed: 30 – 40 Minutes

Lesson Summary:

Declining balance can lead to falls, injuries, and loss of independence, making it one of the leading causes of injury, hospitalization and reduced quality of life among older adults. In this session you will learn practical ways to incorporate balance boosting activities into your daily routine and simple ways to stay strong, steady, and confident.

Lesson Objectives:

By the end of this lesson, participants will be able to:

- Describe how balance changes with age and why it matters.
- Perform simple balance exercises safely with support as needed.
- Identify everyday moments where balance-building movements can be practiced.
- Select one balance strategy to continue at home.

Materials Needed:

- Sturdy chairs or countertops for support
- Comfortable, supportive shoes
- Handout 1: CDC STEADI: “What You Can Do to Prevent Falls”
<https://www.cdc.gov/steady/pdf/STEADI-Brochure-WhatYouCanDo-508.pdf>
- Handout 2: Balance Exercises

Lesson Plan:

Welcome & Introduction- 2 - 5 minutes

- Greet participants and share the session goals.
- Key statistic to set context:
 - *About 1 in 4 adults aged 65+ falls each year, making falls the leading cause of injury in older adults.* (CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/falls/data-research/index.html>)
- Emphasize that many balance issues can be improved with simple, regular practice.

Suggested Script

“Welcome, everyone. Today we are going to talk about balance, including how it changes as we get older, why it matters, and most importantly, simple things you can do every day to maintain your balance to stay steady and confident as you age.”

“Balance is something many of us don’t think about until it becomes harder. But it affects almost everything we do: standing, walking, getting out of a chair, reaching for items, even turning around in the kitchen. When balance becomes weaker, our risk of falling goes up.”

“Falls affect everyone. If you haven’t fallen yourself, chances are that you know someone who has. About one in four adults aged 65 and older experiences a fall each year, and falls are the leading cause of injury and injury-related hospitalization for older adults.” (CDC, 2024: <https://www.cdc.gov/falls/data-research/index.html>)

“The good news is that there are things that you can do to maintain or improve your balance at any age. Incorporating small, simple exercises into your daily routine, can make a real difference. Today we will talk about some of those strategies and practice them together.”

Understanding Balance and Why It Matters- 5 – 10 minutes

- Briefly explain common age-related factors that affect balance:
 - Muscle loss (sarcopenia)
 - Slower reflexes
 - Changes in vision or posture
 - Medication side effects (dizziness, fatigue, low blood pressure)
 - Dehydration
 - Limited movement or fear of falling
- Reference falls-prevention resources recommending attention to balance, strength, medications, visions and home safety. CDC STEADI: “What You Can Do to Prevent Falls” <https://www.cdc.gov/steady/pdf/STEADI-Brochure-WhatYouCanDo-508.pdf>

Suggested Script:

“Before we start practicing balance movements, let’s talk about why balance changes as we age and what factors play a role. Understanding these changes helps us choose the right habits to stay steady and confident in daily life.”

“Balance isn’t controlled by just one part of the body, it’s a joint effort by multiple systems. Your brain, eyes, inner ear, muscles, joints, and nerves all work together every second you’re standing or moving. As we get older, several of these systems naturally slow down or become less efficient. That can make it

harder to recover if we trip or lose our footing. The important thing to remember is that these changes are normal and even more importantly, they are very responsive to practice.”

1. Muscle Loss

“One of the biggest changes as we age is muscle loss. Starting around age 50, most adults lose about 1–2% of muscle strength each year if they aren’t staying active, and that loss can speed up in later decades. The muscles most affected are in the legs, hips, and core, which are the most important muscles in supporting balance. When these muscles get weaker, it becomes harder to stand up from a chair, step over objects, or stay steady when walking on uneven surfaces.”

“Luckily, strength can be rebuilt at any age. Even small daily movements, like sitting and standing from a chair or rising onto your toes, stimulate the muscle fibers that support balance.”

2. Slower Reflexes and Nerve Changes

“Another change that affects balance is slower reflexes. As we age, the nerves that send messages between the brain and the muscles may work a little more slowly. This means the body takes longer to react. Imagine catching your balance after slipping on a rug. When you’re younger, your foot shoots out almost instantly to stop the fall. But with age, that reaction time slows. Even though your body will still react, it just happens more slowly. Balance training, especially exercises that shift your weight or challenge your stability slightly, helps keep these reflex pathways active and responsive.”

3. Vision Changes

“Vision is another key player in balance. Our eyes help us see obstacles, judge distances, and sense changes in the ground, such as steps or uneven surfaces. Some common ways that vision can change as we age includes:

- *Reduced depth perception*
- *Difficulty seeing in low light*
- *Slower adjustment from bright to dim lighting*
- *Vision conditions such as cataracts or macular degeneration*

“When vision becomes less sharp, the body has to rely more on muscles to stay steady. Poor lighting or glare can also make balance harder, especially when walking outside or getting up at night.”

4. Inner Ear (Vestibular) Changes

“Inside the inner ear are tiny structures that act like your body’s balance sensors. They tell your brain when you are moving, turning, or tilting. With age, these sensors can become less sensitive. “This is one reason some people feel unsteady when turning their head, getting out of bed, or walking in the dark.”

“Balance exercises that use movements like slow head turns or shifting weight, can help keep the vestibular system active.”

5. Joint Stiffness and Posture Changes

“Many people notice more stiffness in their ankles, knees, hips, and spine with age. When joints don’t move as easily, it’s harder for the body to make quick adjustments to keep you upright.”

“Good posture also supports balance. When we round our shoulders forward or shuffle our feet, the body’s center of gravity shifts, making it easier to lose balance. Simple daily stretching, gentle ankle mobility work, and sit-to-stand exercises can improve posture and joint movement, making balance steadier.”

6. Medication Side Effects

“Certain medications can have side effects that impact balance, especially medications that can cause dizziness, drowsiness, dehydration, or low blood pressure like:

- *Blood pressure medications*
- *Sleep aids*
- *Pain medications*
- *Some antidepressants*
- *Diuretics (“water pills”)*

“Even medications that have been on for years can affect balance if doses change or if you start taking new medicines that trigger an interaction. The CDC’s STEADI program recommends reviewing medications at least once a year with your doctor or pharmacist.”

7. Hydration

“Staying hydrated is one of the simplest ways to support balance. Dehydration, even mild dehydration, can cause dizziness, low blood pressure, fatigue, and slower reaction time. The National Academy of Medicine suggests an adequate intake of daily fluids of about 13 cups for men and 9 cups for women aged 51 and older. If your doctor has recommended a different amount for you based on pre-existing conditions or medications that you take, you should always follow your individual doctor’s advice.

8. Reduced Daily Movement

“One other thing that changes as we age, is that we tend to be less active. Balance declines when we use it less. If we sit more or avoid movements that feel challenging, our muscles, reflexes, and confidence all decrease over time. The good news is that balance improves with even small bursts of practice. Incorporating even just a minute or two of balance activities at the kitchen counter or while doing other chores can make significant changes in your balance.

None of these changes mean we can't stay steady; they just mean we need regular practice. Next, we'll go through a few easy exercises that help strengthen the muscles and systems that keep you balanced every day."

Active Practice- 15 minutes

Guide participants through the following simple exercises (with support as needed). Demonstrate each exercise. Offer options for seated, supported, or unsupported versions and how to progress by either holding the exercises longer or safely and gradually reducing support.

1. Single Leg Stand

- Hold a countertop or back of a sturdy chair. Can also be done in a seated position.
- Lift one leg slightly off of the floor and hold it if you can for at least 10 seconds. Gradually increase the length of time that you hold your leg up. Switch legs and repeat on the other side.
- Repeat 3-5 times on each side.
- Beginner: start by doing this while seated in a chair to build up leg muscles.
- Advanced: if this is too easy, you can lengthen the amount of time holding stance, or you can gradually decrease the amount of weight being supported by the back of the chair or countertop until you can hold it without support.

2. Marching in Place

- Hold a countertop or back of a sturdy chair. Can also be done in a seated position.
- Standing straight, lift your right knee as high as you can. Lower it, then lift the left leg. Lift and lower your legs 20 times.

3. Body Sway

- Hold a countertop or back of a sturdy chair. Can also be done in a seated position.
- Keep your feet flat on the floor, shoulder-width apart. Move only from your ankles. Start by shifting your weight side to side 5 times, then shifting it forward and back 5 times.
- Combine the movements and shift your weight in a circle clockwise and counterclockwise 5 times each direction.

4. Tip-Toe Raises (Calf Strengthening)

- Hold a countertop or back of a chair. Can also be done in a seated position.
- Rise slowly onto toes, pause, and lower.
- Repeat 8–10 times.
- Practical cue: *"Try this while doing dishes or waiting for the microwave."*
- Advanced: gradually reduce the amount of weight being supported by the chair.
- Evidence: Lower-leg strengthening improves stability and gait
<https://www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/preventing-falls/keeping-well/strength-and-balance-exercises/>

5. Heel-to-Toe Walk (Gait & Stability)

- Walk in a straight line, placing the heel directly in front of the opposite toe.
- Use a wall or counter for support.
- Continue 8–10 steps.
- Beginner: Stand still with toe of one foot touching the heel of the other foot holding on to the back of the chair. If this is still too difficult, widen your stance. Start with 5 seconds if balance is really limited and gradually increase the length of time in this standing position.

6. Sit-to-Stand (Functional Strength)

- Sit toward the front of a chair with feet flat.
- Stand slowly without using hands if able, then sit back down. ****Make sure that you core is engaged and you are not leaning your head forward to use momentum to stand up.****
- Repeat 8–10 times.
- Beginner: Start by using hands to push yourself up. Gradually increase the number of times you repeat this exercise.
- Evidence: Encouraged by physical therapy and geriatric mobility programs (Hopkins Medicine).
<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/fall-prevention-exercises>

Brainstorm & Discussion- 5-10 minutes

Brainstorm as a group: “When could you incorporate these movements into your daily life?”

- Tip-toe raises while brushing teeth or washing dishes
- Heel-to-toe walk down the hallway once a day
- Sit-to-stand repetitions during TV commercials
- Rising onto toes while folding laundry
- Gentle weight-shifting while waiting in line
- Hanging laundry on a clothes line

Reinforce that short, frequent practices can meaningfully improve balance. Regular movement throughout the day supports balance and mobility (CDC Physical Activity Guidelines for Older Adults).

<https://www.cdc.gov/physical-activity-basics/guidelines/older-adults.html>

Wrap Up & Action Planning- 5 minutes

- Ask participants to choose **one** balance activity they will practice this week and share with the group.
- Encourage safe progress: use support when needed, stay hydrated, and pause if dizzy.
- Remind participants to consult a healthcare provider if they have a history of falls, dizziness, or complex medical needs.

- Physical activity and balance practice is just one component of a fall prevention plan. Remind participants that they should be reviewing medication with doctors, staying hydrated and having their vision checked regularly.
- This can be used to facilitate a discussion about other fall prevention strategies and identifying trip hazards around the home.

Additional Resources:

<https://www.cdc.gov/falls/data-research/facts-stats/>

<https://www.cdc.gov/steady/pdf/steady-brochure-stayindependent-508.pdf>

<https://www.cdc.gov/steady/pdf/patient/customizable/caregiver-brochure-final-customizable-508.pdf>

<https://www.cdc.gov/steady/pdf/STEADI-Brochure-ChairRiseEx-508.pdf>