Information & Advice
Helping you to help yourself

Staying Steady

Help the Aged

Endorsed by
The advice given in this leaflet is endorsed by the British Geriatrics Society (BGS). The BGS is the only professional association, in the UK, of doctors practising geriatric medicine.

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There are many simple things that you can do to stay steady on your feet. This leaflet has information and advice for everyone, whether you’re fit and active, have mobility problems, or are worried about falling.

As well as practical advice on how you can improve your strength, balance and mobility, this leaflet looks at the impact that anxiety about falling can have on peoples’ lives. It also tells you about the help you should be able to get if you need it.

**Practical advice**

General health and well-being can make a big difference to your quality of life, whatever your age. Eating well, keeping fit, looking after your bones and looking after your feet are all important. But there are also specific things that you can do to keep your balance. We look at what you can do in this section.

Taking positive action to stay steady on your feet does not mean you have to place restrictions on everything you do. In fact, it should allow you to be more active and give you greater freedom and confidence. Nobody wants to think of themselves or be seen by others as someone who might fall. But remember, the purpose of taking steps to stay steady and prevent falls is to protect and improve your health, mobility and independence – not to take it away.

**Improving your strength and balance**

Walking, gardening and fitness classes are all good ways to keep fit and healthy. But there are also specific exercises you can do to improve your strength and balance.
Everyone can benefit from improving their strength and balance. Exercises to strengthen the muscles of your legs and body and to improve your coordination and balance are known as ‘balance training’. As well as increasing your general fitness, balance training is one of the most effective ways to reduce the risk of falling.

Balance training is especially important if you have problems due to illness, such as joint pain, weakness or feeling dizzy or unsteady. Balance training can help you get back to normal and overcome feelings of stiffness or unsteadiness. If you have difficulty getting around, it can make it easier for you to get out and about without needing support or someone with you all the time.

You can fit balance training into your daily life by carrying out simple exercises at home as and when it suits you. Or you may prefer to join a group at a local centre, where a professional can advise you. This will also give you the opportunity to get to know people, learn from each other, and use special training equipment or play sports. To find out about balance training classes in your local area, ask at your local library, health centre, leisure centre or Age Concern group.

As with any exercise, take it gently at first and build up slowly. Always begin with a warm-up to prepare your body and finish by warming-down. If you’re not used to taking any physical exercise, speak to your doctor first. If you experience chest pain or feel faint you should stop exercising and contact your doctor.
Most people find that balance training is easier than they expected – and more enjoyable. You may be surprised by how much you can achieve.

You can talk to your doctor about how to get the most out of strength and balance training. You will benefit most from an exercise programme specially designed to meet your needs. This is especially important if you have had a fall or are at all unsteady on your feet. See page 11 ‘Help from the NHS’.

Don’t give up on exercising just because you have had a fall or are afraid of falling. Reducing your physical activity can actually make you more prone to falling!

**Checking your eyesight**

Your vision plays an important role in your sense of balance and movement. It is a good idea to have your eyes checked regularly – at least every two years. Eye tests are free if you are aged 60 or over. If you are on a low income you may also get help with the cost of glasses. See our advice leaflet ‘Better Sight’ for advice on eye care. Remember that reading glasses or bifocal or varifocal lenses can make objects and surfaces appear closer than they really are. This could cause you to trip or lose your balance. If you think this could be a problem for you, ask your optician for advice.

**Managing your medicines**

Some medicines can make you faint or unsteady. Let your doctor know if you ever feel like this after taking medication. They may want to review and change
your prescription. If you take more than four kinds of medicine, ask your doctor or pharmacist to check them for you regularly. You may find it useful to read our advice leaflet ‘Managing Your Medicines’.

Make sure you get a flu jab every winter. Flu can make you unsteady on your feet. See our free advice leaflet ‘Fight the Flu’, which explains what flu is, who is at risk and what to do if you have it.

**Checking your home environment**

Keeping an eye out for things that could cause you to slip or trip can make your home more convenient to live in. Most of these tips are common sense. You may well have thought about them already. But it’s worth looking at them again as a reminder or in case your situation has changed. Making just a small adjustment can make things easier.

- **Good lighting is very important, particularly on the stairs.** If you need to get up in the night, switch on a light to make sure you can see where you are going.

- **Handrails fitted to your stairs can make them easier and safer to climb.**

- **If you are having difficulties moving around your home, would it help to rearrange your furniture so you are less likely to bump into things?** (If you need to use your furniture for support, you should get advice from an occupational therapist – see page 11 ‘Help from the NHS’.)

- **Remember to keep the floor clear of trailing flexes, rucked-up or fraying carpets or anything else you might trip over or slip on.**