Staying steady

Improving your strength and balance

Health & wellbeing
Age UK is the new force combining Age Concern and Help the Aged. With almost 120 years of combined history to draw on, we are bringing together our talents, services and solutions to do more to enrich the lives of people in later life.

The Age UK family includes Age Cymru, Age NI and Age Scotland. There are also more than 160 local Age UKs.

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Please seek medical advice for guidance on appropriate exercise levels and precautions. It is particularly important to seek such advice if you suffer from an ongoing medical condition that may be affected by exercise. Always start any exercise programme slowly, and never force or strain. If you feel any soreness, strain, discomfort, distress or other symptoms, stop the exercise and seek medical advice immediately.

Every effort has been made to ensure that the information contained in this guide is correct. However, things do change, so it is always a good idea to seek expert advice on your personal situation.

Date of publication: April 2012 © Age UK 2012
Introduction

There are lots of simple things that you can do to help you stay steady on your feet. This guide has information for everyone, whether you’re fit and active, have difficulty walking and getting around, or are worried about falling.

General health and wellbeing can make a big difference to your quality of life, whatever your age. Eating well and keeping fit are important. But there are also specific things that you can do to improve your strength and balance, which are set out in this guide.

Throughout this guide you will find suggestions for organisations that can offer further information and advice about your options. Their contact details can be found in the ‘Useful organisations’ section (see pages 26–34). Contact details for organisations near you can usually be found in your local phone book. If you have difficulty finding them, your local Age UK should be able to help (see page 26).

As far as possible, the information given in this guide is applicable across the UK.

Key

This symbol indicates where information differs for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

This symbol indicates who to contact for the next steps you need to take.
Improving your fitness, strength and balance

Keeping active helps you maintain strength, flexibility and energy levels, so you can carry on doing the things you enjoy and stay independent. There are many good ways to keep fit and healthy without even realising that you’re doing it, for example, walking, gardening or dancing. If you don’t usually do any exercise, any amount of activity is better than nothing – even taking regular brisk walks in the garden or around the block.

The Government recommends that you try to build up to two-and-a-half hours of moderate aerobic activity (exercise that gets you breathing harder and your heart pumping faster) and two sessions of muscle-strengthening activities each week if you can.

Muscle-strengthening activities are repetitive activities that strengthen muscles throughout your body by using your body weight or working against a resistance. This might be:

- playing badminton, ballroom dancing or doing yoga
- carrying a shopping bag
- repeatedly pushing against a wall
- attending a special chair-based exercise class
- working with resistance bands.

For more information about recommended activities, including aerobic activities, visit the NHS Choices website (see page 32). In Wales, visit the NHS Direct Wales website and in Scotland, visit the NHS Inform website (see page 32).
**Balance training**

Activities that improve muscle strength and balance – often known as balance training – are particularly important as you get older. They can make it easier to get up out of a chair, and because they improve your posture, co-ordination and balance, they’re an effective way to reduce the risk of falling.

Balance training can be especially helpful if you have an illness that causes joint pain as it helps overcome stiffness and unsteadiness. Best of all, it can make it easier to get out and about without needing to have someone with you.

You can fit balance training into your day by doing simple exercises at home, as and when it suits you. Or you may prefer to join a group at a local centre where you’ll have a professional to advise and encourage you, plus the opportunity to meet other group members.

To find out about balance-training classes in your area, ask at your local Age UK, leisure centre, library, health centre, or GP practice. Age UK has an exercise DVD and a table-top book of exercises that aim to help improve your balance (see page 27). You can also check to see if there’s a Fit as a Fiddle class in your area (see page 27).

Speak to your GP about how you can exercise safely, especially if you have a heart condition or haven’t been exercising regularly. See ‘Help from the NHS’ (page 22).
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Getting started... and keeping it up

Once you get the go-ahead from your GP and know what kind of exercises are right for you, you should start gently and build up slowly.

Most people find being more active easier than they expected – and more enjoyable. The more you enjoy an activity, the easier it is to keep it up, and that’s when you’ll really reap the benefits. You may be surprised by how much you can achieve. It’s important to keep trying to progress, for example, by doing a balance-training exercise for 30 seconds and building it up to 40 seconds the next time. Practice makes perfect and it’s important to maintain a good fitness level, so you should do whatever you’re able to do on a regular basis.

Don’t give up on exercising just because you’ve had a fall or are afraid of falling. In fact, reducing your physical activity can actually make you more prone to falling.

Of course, you’ll benefit most from an exercise programme specifically designed to meet your needs. This is particularly important if you’ve had a fall or are at all unsteady on your feet. Many care homes arrange exercise classes and activities tailored to meet the varied needs of their residents.

Joining a dance class, using weights and doing yoga can all have similar benefits to doing balance-training exercises.

Remember, you should always begin any exercise with a warm-up to prepare your body and finish with cool-down exercises. If you experience chest pain or feel faint, stop exercising immediately and contact your GP.
Eyesight, hearing and balance

Vision and hearing play a vital role in balance and movement.

Eyecare

Glasses fitted with bifocal or varifocal lenses can make objects and surfaces appear closer than they really are, so they might cause you to trip or lose your balance, particularly on stairs. If you’ve had problems with these glasses or are considering them, ask your optician for advice.

It’s recommended that you have your eyes checked and your glasses prescription reviewed at least every two years, or every year if you’re over 70. NHS eye tests are free once you reach the age of 60, and if you live in Scotland they are free for everyone.

If you receive certain benefits, such as Income Support or the Guarantee Credit part of Pension Credit, you may also be entitled to help with the full cost of new glasses. If you’re not eligible for these benefits but are on a low income, you may be entitled to help through the NHS Low Income Scheme (see page 32).

If you live in England and find it difficult to get to the optician for health reasons, your Primary Care Trust’s Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) will have a list of local opticians who offer home visits. Call NHS Direct for details of PCT PALS that can help (see page 32).
In Wales, contact NHS Direct Wales for details of opticians who can offer home visits (see page 32). There is also a Primary Eyecare Acute Referral Scheme (PEARS) in Wales. This was introduced as part of the Welsh Government’s Welsh Eye Care Initiative (WECI) and aims to give people who experience a sudden eye problem a prompt, free, eye-health assessment without needing to be referred by their GP. You can have a PEARS eye test at any PEARS-registered optometrist. For details of local optometrists taking part in the scheme, call NHS Direct Wales (see page 32).

In Scotland, healthcare is organised through local health boards. Call NHS Inform for more information on local services (see page 32). In Northern Ireland, search for local health services via the NI Direct website (see page 32).

If you have sight loss, you can contact the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) for information or call the helpline (see page 33).

See our free guide *Caring for your eyes* to find out more about looking after your eyes. For more information about help with the cost of glasses and the Low Income Scheme, see our free factsheet *Help with health costs*. For more information, contact the NHS Low Income Scheme (see page 32).

Check when your next sight test is due. If you care for someone who is unable to recognise or communicate sight problems, for example, someone with dementia, remember to arrange for regular eye tests – you can ask the optician about using special non-verbal tests. Encourage the person to wear glasses if they need them.
Hearing problems
Hearing loss is more likely as you get older, but people often wait several years before raising hearing problems with their GP. If you have a problem with your ears, it can severely affect your balance. If there’s no medical reason for any issues, such as a build-up of wax or an ear infection, you can be referred for a hearing test and, if necessary, prescribed an NHS digital hearing aid in one or both ears.

If hearing problems are affecting your day-to-day or social life, make an appointment to see your GP. Action on Hearing Loss offers a free phone-based or online hearing check (see page 28).

If you have a problem with your ears, it can severely affect your balance.
Combined sight and hearing problems

Hearing loss can affect your balance and this can be even harder to manage if you have sight problems that can’t be corrected by wearing glasses. Your local authority will have a sensory team that can offer help and support. Following an assessment, their specialist staff will explain the help available to make daily tasks easier. They can also offer mobility training, including advice on moving around at home and outdoors, and how to keep as fit and active as you can.

Contact your local social services department (social work department in Scotland) to explain how your vision or hearing difficulties or both are affecting your daily life and ask for an assessment.

Contact Sense (see page 34) or Deafblind UK (see page 29) for information and advice if you have problems with both your sight and hearing.