

SENIOR FITNESS

Exercise to Prevent Falling

By
Jim Evans

DEAR JIM: One of my greatest fears as I get older is falling. I'm in my seventies now, and I've already taken a few minor tumbles. I guess I've been lucky so far because I haven't been injured except for a few bumps and bruises, but one of my friends fell and broke her hip last year, and her health deteriorated within just a few months until she passed away last March. Is there anything I can do to protect myself from falling? **Wobbly in Wauwatosa**

DEAR WOBBLY: Falling is a legitimate concern for older adults because, according to the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (NCIPC), falls are the leading cause of injury deaths among older adults (Murphy 2000) and the most common cause of nonfatal injuries and hospital admissions for trauma (Alexander 1992). Hip fractures, in particular, cause the greatest number of deaths and lead to the most severe health problems and reduced quality of life (Wolinsky 1997; Hall 2000). What can you do about it?

Fortunately there are some exercises that you can do to improve your strength and stability and reduce the likelihood of falling. Strength training – particularly lower body exercises – can help. One exercise that I have often recommended is the simple knee bend:

- Stand with your back to your favorite easy chair with your feet about shoulder width apart and your hands on your hips.
- Keep your feet flat on the floor (don't lift your heels) and slowly begin to lower yourself down into a sitting position.
- Keep your back straight (don't lean forward) and slowly raise your hands from your hips and extend your arms in front of you for balance as you descend.
- Stick your buns back as far as they will go – this is no time to be ladylike – and keep your head up looking straight ahead during the entire movement.
- Continue to lower yourself down until your buns just barely touch the edge of the chair.
- Now, slowly raise yourself back to an upright position returning your hands to your hips as you stand up.

This is harder than it sounds because most people have poor balance as they get older, but if you lose your balance and start to fall, you will just fall back into your chair anyway. Some people might have to use a cane, a walker, or even the back of another chair in front of them to hold on to in the beginning until they develop their balance. The hardest part for most people is learning to stick their posterior (yes, those “buns” again) back far enough so that your knees do not extend past your toes. This is very important so that you do not injure your knees.

Try performing this movement several times a day – perhaps during the commercials when you are watching TV – until you can gradually work up to at least 15 consecutive repetitions 2-3 times a week. This exercise will strengthen your legs but, more important, it will also strengthen your hips which will greatly help your balance and stability.

Tai chi is another favorite physical activity that I have mentioned over the years for improving your balance. In fact, a recent edition of the International Council on Active Aging (ICAA) newsletter (Vol. 5,19), cited a study by NCIPC researchers and Emory University involving 291 women and 20 men, ages 70-97, which concluded that “tai chi should be considered in any program designed to reduce falling and fear of falling in transitionally frail older adults.” Many private and commercial health clubs, YMCAs, senior centers, and community recreation centers offer tai chi, so you might check to see what resources might be available in your own community.

Jim Evans is a 38-year veteran of the health and fitness industry and a nationally recognized consultant on fitness for seniors. He is chairman of the advisory council for RSVP in San Diego County and host of the popular weekly radio talk show “Forever Young” on KCBQ 1170 AM (KCBQ.com).