

# **Improve Your Balance**

We rarely think about walking across the street, or standing up and sitting down, but maintaining and training the fine-tuned balance system in our body is crucial to maintaining optimal mobility, preventing injuries, promoting healthy aging and improving sports performance.

## **Test Your Balance**

Stand with your arms crossed over your chest and your legs not touching. Lift one leg off the floor and hold it up as long as you can, without bracing it against the standing leg. Try this first with your eyes open, then with your eyes closed.

Researchers from the University of Missouri have established norms for single leg stance for different ages:

AGE	EYES OPEN	EYES CLOSED
20-29:	29 seconds	21 seconds
30-39:	29 seconds	14 seconds
40-49:	29 seconds	10 seconds
50-59:	28 seconds	8 seconds
60-69:	26 seconds	5 seconds
70-79:	14 seconds	4 seconds

Was it harder than you thought? Of course, this exercise only tests static balance. Many of our movements throughout the day or in athletic activities involve complex and coordinated dynamic balance (involving movement). Maintaining balance involves input from three main systems: the vestibular system (inner ear, orientation, spatial awareness), the visual system (sight), and the proprioceptive system (input from muscles and joints). Our brain integrates this information and sends signals to the muscles in our eyes and throughout our body to react in a coordinated manner in order to keep our body and movements balanced and our vision focused. Good balance involves these systems working together optimally, and this takes care and practice to maintain. Any balance activity will become more challenging if the surface is unsteady or if your eyes are closed.

Here are 3 easy ways to start improving your balance.

1. Start by standing on one leg at different times throughout the day. Practice this with your eyes closed. Make it more challenging by balancing on a foam cushion or balance disc if you have access to equipment at a gym or simply a folded-up towel or pillow at home.
2. Walk heel-toe with your eyes open and then your eyes closed to add difficulty.
3. Stand on one leg and have a ball toss with someone or throw a ball against a wall by yourself.

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