

Erik Peper, PhD  
San Francisco State University



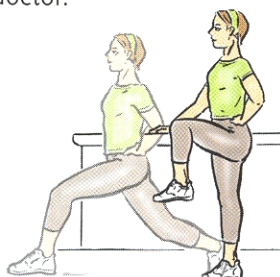
## Better Balance, Fewer Falls

**F**alls are a primary cause of injury, especially as we get older. Reduce the risk of falling—and the bone fractures that can result—with exercises that improve balance, strength and coordination. Before starting an exercise program, check with your doctor.



**1 Strengthen core muscles** (in the abdomen and low back). **Equipment:** Inflatable exercise ball, about \$20 at sporting-goods stores. **To start:** Holding on to a counter or other stable object, sit on the ball, feet flat on the floor. Rock gently side to side, then forward and back. Continue for one minute, and gradually increase to 10 minutes. **Advanced:** Do the moves above while lifting one foot off the floor slightly and/or without holding on to anything.

**2 Improve awareness and sensitivity. Helpful habit:** To heighten the sensitivity of your feet, walk barefoot as often as possible—in your home or over a safe but slightly uneven surface, such as a lawn, beach or plastic simulated pebble mat. **Do anywhere:** When you are walking, plan your path—step on each crack in the sidewalk or on alternating tiles of a linoleum floor. This trains you to notice obstacles in your path.



**3 Build hip and leg strength. To start:** Sit in a chair and lift one knee as high as is comfortable, hold for a count of three, then lower. Do 10 lifts with each leg. **Intermediate:** Stand and hold on to a counter with one or both hands. Bending your leg, lift one knee as high as is comfortable and hold for a count of 10. Repeat 10 times, then switch legs. **Advanced:** Standing and holding on to a counter, lift your left knee above waist height, then lunge forward with the left foot in an exaggerated step. Both knees will be slightly bent as your foot lands. Repeat 10 times, then switch legs. When you master this move, do it without holding on. **Do anywhere:** When walking, concentrate on pushing off with the big toe of the back foot. This improves the speed and coordination of your gait.



**4 Gain confidence in movement. To start:** Placing both hands on a wall at shoulder level, step back until your arms are almost straight. Lean slightly toward the wall until you begin to lose your balance (to simulate the start of a fall), then quickly step forward with one foot to prevent falling. Keep your hands on the wall for added security. **Advanced:** Stand farther away from the wall to increase the tipping angle, with hands raised to shoulder level but not touching the wall. Lean forward and step quickly, as above. If necessary, catch yourself by gently placing your hands on the wall. **Do anywhere:** Incorporate physical activity into your routine as much as possible. **Examples:** Climb stairs two at a time...carry a basket instead of using a cart when you shop.

**Bottom Line/Women's Health** interviewed Erik Peper, PhD, professor of holistic health and codirector of San Francisco State University's Institute for Holistic Healing Studies. He also was lead author of an article on preventing falls, published in *Biofeedback*.