



# core concerns

Maintaining a strong foundation  
leads to better balance —  
and better health

**B**alance is sometimes easy to take for granted, until those precarious moments when you're balancing a child on one hip and a bag of groceries on the other, while negotiating a slippery Chicago winter sidewalk. But it plays a vital role in all physical activities and is a key component of good health in many important ways.

Proper balance means your muscles work well together and your natural movements cause the least amount of stress on joints. It makes sitting, standing, walking and all activities easier and helps lower the risk of falling, a serious danger that increases as we grow older.

Good balance is the result of an intricate and complex relationship between our brains and the signals they send to our bodies about the conditions of our immediate environment and the changing conditions of our bodies themselves.

"It's important to be able to compensate if you miss a step on a staircase, for example," said Nora Sullivan, outpatient physical therapy supervisor at the Galter LifeCenter. "Any time you step onto an unfamiliar surface, your brain needs that input from what's going on to be able to adjust your response to your environment, so you can be as physically stable and effective as you can be, whether

that's walking, running or making a layup on the basketball court."

### **Injury and aging can affect balance**

Younger women who remain mindful of maintaining proper balance can stay healthy and help avoid joint and gait problems longer. However, women who have been injured and older women should address any related balance problems, she said.

"When you're injured with something like an ankle sprain, the signals to your brain aren't going to travel as well, and the joint receptors aren't going to be as effective in sending those messages," Sullivan said.

As we age, the inner ear component of our balance becomes less effective. In addition, blood pressure irregularities and commonly prescribed medications can cause dizziness and balance issues. And for older folks who don't incorporate physical conditioning into their daily lives, that sedentary lifestyle can lead to premature decline in strength and flexibility, which results in a higher likelihood of falling.

### **Stabilizing your core for better movement**

Jesse Berg, a group instructor at the Galter LifeCenter, recommends improving balance and body awareness by gradually strengthening the core muscles.

He said a good way to start is by practicing yoga, Pilates or other core exercise routines on a stable surface, like a mat. These exercises develop and maintain core muscles in the trunk and torso, stabilize the spine and pelvis and make movement more efficient and less stressful to muscles and joints.

As your form improves and your muscles adjust over time, you can work with a trainer and progress to a more intense routine that may incorporate other forms of exercise or equipment, like a BOSU ball, Berg said.

BOSU balls provide an unstable surface that requires your body to not only stabilize and work the target muscles, but also maintain your center of gravity over a surface that is constantly changing.

Berg warns that although BOSU balls can be very beneficial for some people, many fitness instructors discourage their clients from using them due to the increased risk of injury if the ball is used incorrectly.

"[BOSU] is more challenging and requires better form and understanding than other core activities," Berg said. "But it has many different uses, and with a trainer's help you can find a routine most beneficial for you." **W**