

How Balance Impacts Your Heart and Brain Health

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Balance is a foundational skill your body uses constantly, from standing up and reaching to walking across a room. It's also a powerful indicator of overall health, especially heart and brain function
- › Research shows that impaired balance predicts future cardiovascular events, including heart attack and stroke, even in adults with no prior heart conditions
- › Poor balance in older adults is also strongly linked to increased dementia risk. Those with lower balance times face significantly higher rates of Alzheimer's and vascular dementia
- › To assess your balance at home, try doing simple tests like standing on one leg for 10 seconds or completing the "timed up and go" test in under 12 seconds
- › Incorporate activities like heel-to-toe walking, chair-supported squats, stability ball use, gentle tai chi or yoga, and ankle strengthening exercises into your daily workout routine to improve your balance

Every time you get up from a chair, turn to reach for something, or walk across a room, you rely on balance, an ability so automatic that it's easy to overlook. But these ordinary movements depend on constant input and coordination from your brain, muscles, joints, inner ear, and cardiovascular system. When that connection starts to weaken, balance is often the first thing to falter.

Balance is not just important for avoiding falls and staying independent. Several studies have shown that it's a powerful indicator of overall health, closely tied to both heart and brain function.^{1,2} These findings highlight why it's essential to protect your balance before it begins to decline.

Poor Balance Signals Higher Risk of Cardiovascular Disease

A September 2024 study published in the Journal of the American Heart Association, conducted by researchers from Umeå, Sweden, set out to determine whether impaired balance predicts future cardiovascular disease (CVD) in older adults. Researchers followed 4,927 individuals, all age 70 and without any history of heart attack, angina, or stroke at baseline.³

- **How balance was measured** – The participants underwent balance testing under two conditions – standing quietly with eyes open and with eyes closed. Their sway was recorded in millimeters, both side-to-side (lateral) and forward-backward (anterior-posterior). These measurements were analyzed alongside other clinical data, including blood pressure, body weight, and medication use.
- **Lateral sway was a consistent predictor of CVD** – Participants who swayed more from side to side during balance tests were more likely to be hospitalized for heart attack, stroke, or angina in the years that followed. For every 1 millimeter of added lateral sway during the test with eyes open, the risk of developing cardiovascular disease increased by about 1.4%. The risk rose by about 1.5% per millimeter when the test was done with eyes closed.
- **The more you sway, the higher your risk** – The results showed that participants in the top quarter for lateral sway had a significantly higher rate of cardiovascular events compared to those in the lowest quarter. This means that even small increases in sway added up to a meaningful difference in future health outcomes.

- **Unsteady forward-backward movement mattered too** — Among those tested with eyes closed, people who had faster and more erratic movement in the forward-backward direction were also more likely to develop CVD. These patterns reflected instability that wasn't visible during regular medical visits.
- **Balance testing outperformed some traditional risk markers** — Side-to-side sway, especially during eyes-closed tests, ranked among the four strongest predictors of cardiovascular disease, along with being male and taking medications for high blood pressure or clot prevention. These four factors together explained 61% of the risk across the population. Balance alone accounted for about 10% of that risk.
- **The results were consistent and reliable** — Even after removing participants with very short follow-up periods, the findings didn't change. Just 1 millimeter more sway still raised the risk of cardiovascular disease by up to 1.8%, depending on test conditions.

Impaired Balance in Older Adults Is Strongly Linked to Cognitive Decline

Beyond heart health, balance reflects how well the brain integrates sensory and motor signals. In older adults, impaired balance is an early indicator of cognitive dysfunction, even before memory loss or disorientation appears. A January 2024 analysis published in *The Journal of Prevention of Alzheimer's Disease* evaluated 143,788 community-dwelling Korean adults and found strong evidence linking balance impairment to the future onset of dementia.⁴

- **Balance testing predicted future dementia** — Those who showed balance impairment at age 66 had significantly higher rates of new-onset dementia compared to those with normal balance. The dementia rate was more than twice as high in those who could stand on one leg for less than 10 seconds versus those who could hold the position for 20 seconds or longer.

- **Higher risk of both Alzheimer's and vascular dementia** – Participants with poor balance faced an 83% higher risk of all-cause dementia compared to those with normal balance. Their risk of Alzheimer's disease was 80% higher, and the risk of vascular dementia was almost three times higher.
- **Shorter balance time meant higher dementia risk** – Even small reductions in balance performance showed a continuous, stepwise relationship with dementia risk. People in the “cautious” category (10 to 19 seconds of one-leg standing) still had a 28% higher dementia risk compared to those who could balance for 20 seconds or longer.
- **White matter damage and cortical atrophy may explain the link** – Poor balance was associated with structural brain changes often seen in early cognitive decline, including white matter lesions and gray matter atrophy in regions tied to motor and memory functions. These changes weaken both physical and cognitive processing, reducing adaptability in daily life.
- **Microvascular disease contributes to cognitive and motor decline** – Vascular-related damage in the frontal-subcortical circuits (which regulate movement and decision-making) explains why balance issues often accompany executive dysfunction, slowed thinking, and increased dementia risk. These shared neural pathways suggest that the same biological disruptions that undermine stability also degrade cognition.
- **A non-cognitive early marker for dementia** – Because balance testing is simple, noninvasive, and predictive, the authors propose it as a valuable screening tool for identifying dementia risk in older adults, especially in those who have not yet shown signs of cognitive impairment.

Gait and Leg Strength Also Predict Dementia Risk

Supporting the findings from the January 2024 analysis, an August 2024 study published in the *Journal of Gerontology*⁵ confirms that poor balance, reduced walking speed, and lower body weakness are strong predictors of future dementia. Drawing from over 9,000 older adults tracked for up to 15 years, the study found that simple physical tests already used in routine geriatric assessments offer insight into cognitive vulnerability before symptoms appear.

- **Impaired balance predicted up to a threefold increase in dementia risk** – Older adults who struggled to maintain a semi-tandem stance (standing with one foot slightly ahead of the other, heel beside toe) had a two to three times higher risk of developing dementia compared to those with stable balance.
- **Slower walking speed signaled significantly elevated risk** – Participants with slower gait at baseline had a 52% to 73% greater likelihood of dementia onset. The walking test, long known for predicting frailty and mortality, also proved to be a powerful early marker of cognitive decline.
- **Lower limb strength mattered too** – Poor performance on the chair stand test, an indicator of leg strength and neuromuscular coordination, was linked to a 56% higher risk of dementia. This adds to growing evidence that physical frailty and cognitive deterioration share overlapping biological pathways.
- **Risk consistent across sex, age, and genetic risk** – The associations were consistent regardless of participant sex, age, or presence of the APOE ε4 gene, a major genetic risk factor for Alzheimer's. These findings support the role of motor testing as a universal tool for early dementia screening.

To learn more about why balance matters as you age, read "[Balance Function Serves as a Key Marker for Healthy Aging.](#)"

Assess Your Balance with These Simple Tests

Adults, especially those over 50, should ideally test and train their balance before trouble begins. As reported by the Associated Press, the basic at-home tests below offer powerful insights into your ability to balance and overall health:⁶

- **Standing on one leg** — Dr. Greg W. Hartley, a physical therapy professor at the University of Miami, recommends a simple balance test that involves standing on one leg for 10 seconds. If you're able to hold it without wobbling, you're likely within a safe range. Struggling with the test, however, is a signal to seek medical evaluation.

For more insight into what one-leg balance tells you about your health, check out [“Balancing on One Leg Reveals Important Clues About Your Neuromuscular Health.”](#)

- **Timed walking tests gauge** — The “timed up and go” test (TUG) offers a quick check of your functional balance. You rise from a chair, walk 10 feet (3 meters), turn around, walk back, and sit down. You should ideally complete this in under 12 seconds. Taking more than 15 seconds marks impaired balance.

5 Daily Exercises to Enhance Your Balance

Don't wait until you lose your footing — start improving your balance now to support your heart, brain, and overall health. I recommend starting with the five strategies below, which you can fit seamlessly into your daily routine. If you're just starting out, begin with exercises 1 through 3 and gradually add the others as your confidence grows.

1. **Walk heel-to-toe like you're on a tightrope** — Take 20 slow, deliberate steps in a straight line, placing the heel of one foot directly in front of the toes of the other. Keep your arms relaxed and your eyes fixed on a point ahead. This improves your brain's spatial processing and enhances coordination.

- 2. Do chair-supported squats** – Stand with your feet hip-width apart. While you're holding the back of a chair, lower yourself as if sitting down. Begin with five reps and increase gradually.
- 3. Use a stability ball** – Sit or kneel on a stability ball for 30 seconds, adding time as your balance improves. This activates deep core muscles and builds full-body stability.
- 4. Perform gentle Tai Chi or yoga** – You don't need to join a class. Just a few minutes of slow, controlled breathing and movement done at home is enough. These practices blend breathing, movement, and balance to improve coordination and body awareness.
- 5. Build ankle strength** – Weak ankles cause instability. Sit in a chair and try writing the alphabet in the air with your foot. Strengthen your ankles by tracing the alphabet with your foot while seated or doing toe raises while standing.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About Balance

Q: What does balance reveal about overall health?

A: Balance reflects the integrity of your nervous, muscular, and cardiovascular systems. Research shows that poor balance is linked to a higher risk of heart disease, stroke, and cognitive decline.

Q: What does it mean if I sway while trying to stand still?

A: Swaying side to side, especially when your eyes are closed, could be a sign that your brain and body aren't working together as smoothly as they should. Even small increases in sway have been linked to a higher risk of heart problems and memory decline.

Q: Can poor balance really predict dementia?

A: Yes. Several large-scale studies have found that impaired balance in midlife is associated with a significantly higher risk of developing Alzheimer’s or vascular dementia years later, even before memory issues begin.

Q: How can I test my balance at home?

A: Try standing on one leg for 10 seconds or completing the “timed up and go” test. Struggling with either is a sign to focus on balance training and seek further evaluation.

Q: What’s the best way to improve my balance daily?

A: Incorporate simple movements into your routine, like heel-to-toe walking, chair squats, stability ball exercises, and ankle drills. These small, consistent practices make a big difference over time.

Sources and References

- ^{1, 3} [J Am Heart Assoc. 2024 Oct;13\(19\):e035073](#)
- ^{2, 4} [The Journal of Prevention of Alzheimer's Disease Volume 11, Issue 1, January 2024, Pages 130-137](#)
- ⁵ [J Gerontol A Biol Sci Med Sci. 2024 Aug 1;79\(8\):glae165](#)
- ⁶ [AP News, January 11, 2025](#)