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Kathleen Stewart focuses on the benefits of balance training

Working out on a fine balancing act

Welcome to Fitness Matters. This time I am turning my attention to balance training, a frequently neglected component of fitness that has benefits for women, particularly at the menopause. Balance training plays a critical role in the prevention of falls and the subsequent risk of osteoporotic fractures. It has been reported that in adults more than the age of 40, bone mass decreases by 0.5% per year. However, more worrying, early post-menopausal women experience a rapid loss of bone over and above this due to declining estrogen levels. This increases our risk of falls and osteoporotic fractures of the wrist, spine and hip in later

life, in the absence of an appropriate exercise intervention. We have already looked at the importance of resistance training in the maintenance of bone mineral density. However, weak muscles, along with poor postural control and reduced lower limb range of motion all increase the risk of falls and injury in older women.

While it has proven difficult to determine the importance of resistance, flexibility and balance training in fall prevention, all three fitness components should be included in our training programme.

Given the consequences of osteoporotic fractures, including diminished quality of life and potential loss of independence, it is never too early to incorporate balance training into our exercise regimes. Classes like Yoga, Pilates and Body Balance are highly beneficial in improving balance, co-ordination, muscular strength, endurance and flexibility and can be accessed at your local leisure centre or in the community.

I always include lots of standing balance work in my Fitness Pilates and Swiss Ball classes. My clients enjoy the challenge

of staying upright and are often amazed by how quickly their balance improves.

But don't worry if you can't get to classes. The following three-dimensional exercise routine uses the Swiss Ball to really challenge your balance and core muscles and can be done at home. Swiss Balls are a cheap and easily sourced piece of fitness equipment. For

best results, perform each exercise slowly, with focus and concentration. Aim to do each exercise 8-12 times on each side. If you find it difficult to incorporate the upper body movements at first, leave them out. Don't give up. You'll be amazed how quickly you improve with regular practice.

1 Place one foot on the ball as



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shown. Roll the ball out in front of you while stretching your arms overhead. At the same time slowly roll the ball towards you and bend forward, contracting your abdominal muscles.

2 This time we are rolling the ball directly out to the side. While pushing the ball away with your foot, bend directly to the side and stretch overhead.

Return to the start position. 3 Finally, push the ball out to the back corner, while using your arms to initiate torso rotation. Your arms return to the start position as you roll the ball back towards your body. Think of twenty to four on the clock face.

I hope you enjoy this exercise sequence. You can contact me on kathleen@katsfitness.co.uk



Moving 6000 or more steps a day, no matter how, adds up to a healthier life for midlife women. If you can manage that level of physical activity it will substantially decrease the risk of diabetes and metabolic syndrome (a diabetes precursor and a risk for cardiovascular disease), according to a study published online recently in Menopause, the journal of the North American Menopause Society.

Other studies have shown the value of structured exercise in lowering health risks such as diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease, this study has shown that habitual physical activity, whether it comes from exercising or the simple activities of daily living, has the power to improve women's health. In Passo Fundo, Brazil, 292 women who were 45 to 72 years old wore pedometers and recorded their daily steps. They also had health checks such as cholesterol and blood sugar and waist and hip measure-

Are you ready to start the journey to health?

ment (to gauge abdominal obesity, which is a risk for diabetes and cardiovascular disease).

Women who took 6000 or more steps per day were considered active and those who took fewer were seen to be inactive.

The active women were much less likely than the inactive ones to be obese and have metabolic syndrome or diabetes, whether or not they had gone through menopause - when these risks go up and whether or not they were using hormone therapy.

For midlife women, it looks like the journey to health begins with 6000 steps.

NEXT ISSUE
Resistance Training Revisited