

Conquer the  
fear of falling,  
step by step

# GOING STANDARD

By Catherine Gandel Illustrations by Michael Klein

THE ROOM AT MY LOCAL YMCA is dark, lit by four scented candles placed in the appropriate feng shui positions—north, south, east, and west. Eastern music plays softly. Six of us are breathing deeply, slowly shifting from the Rocking Motion position to White Crane Spreads Its Wings. The instructor makes it look easy, but the grace of the Crane escapes me. I feel more like Daffy Duck. But I am determined to learn this and other moves practiced in tai chi, the ancient Chinese martial art that uses gentle, flowing movements.

**W**hy? I don't want to follow in my mother's footsteps. If she had started tai chi or some other exercise program in her late 50s, maybe she would not have become the poster girl for falling. In her 70s and 80s, she fell countless times, breaking her hip, pelvis, and both ankles in the process. One in three people over age 65 falls each year, according to The National Safety Council, making falls the leading cause of injuries in this age group. And about 25 percent of those who suffer hip injuries die within a year.

The people who are physically hurt aren't the only victims, however. Many more are so afraid of falling they become prisoners to this fear. They may start to avoid activities that require prolonged walking. In severe cases, they may refuse to leave their homes.

In fact, fear of falling is the number one worry among older adults in the U.S., according to Elizabeth Walker Peterson, an associate professor of occupational therapy at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Studies show it even surpasses the fear of being robbed. (Indeed, when my mom was robbed by a knife-wielding young man, she coolly asked him if he'd like a cup of coffee.)

But it's a hidden fear. While up to 50 percent of older adults admit to being worried about falling, many of their doctors don't know it. The fear has been recognized as a legitimate health concern for only 10 years or so, and few physicians think to ask about it. And if they did, many patients would deny it.

There was no hiding Mom's anxiety. After each fall, she moved a little more cautiously

snag her foot. We finally had to staple the cords to the ceiling. It wasn't attractive, but it was safe. Next, we installed a stair elevator to take Mom upstairs and purchased a portable commode so she could avoid the hall at night. Later, to avoid stairs, Mom added a downstairs bathroom and put her bed in a nearby room. Not all modifications have to be that expensive, says physical therapist Natalie Stelzer of the Visiting Nurse Service of New York. "One of the simplest changes is to add a two-inch cushion to a chair—which makes all the difference in a person's ability to stand up."

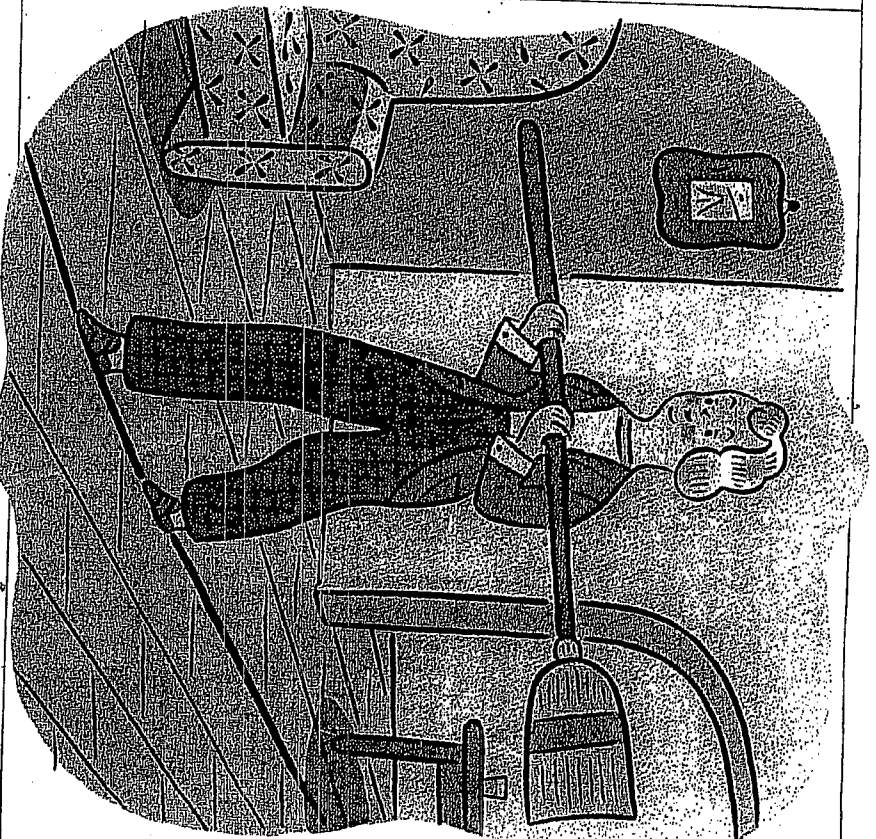
After making your home safer, take easy steps to improve balance. Wearing snug-fitting shoes with thin, firm soles makes it easier to detect changes in terrain. Then there's the cane, which some people resist because they think it makes them look old. Not Mom. She loved pointing it when giving orders.

Unfortunately, being thrifty, she used a cane shed found. She quickly learned that canes, like shoes and golf putters, have to fit your body. (When you're standing up with your shoes on, the top of the canes handle should be level with the crease of your wrist.) She chose her next cane the smart way: She went to a well-staffed hospital pharmacy and test-drove several models.

Another cause of cane mutiny: holding it on the same side as your unsteady leg. "Canes should be held in the hand opposite the weaker extremity to provide stability and balance," says Stelzer. "It frustrates me when I see characters in the movies carrying the cane on the wrong side."

Although taking these tips will lend stability, doing light exercises that increase natural balance can offer the greatest benefits. "The ideal time for a person to begin an exercise program is before he or she has a fall," says Stelzer. "But it's never too late to reap the benefits. Exercise—walking, stretching, weight training, dancing, yoga, and tai chi—can improve mobility and balance even after a fall."

Even with the home secured and the right tools in hand, the fear of



**'The ideal time for a person to begin an exercise program is before he or she has a fall,' says one expert. 'But it's never too late to reap the benefits.'**

falling can persist. First, don't let the fear scare you. It's a rational response to the possibility of injury, but one that needn't run your life. You can increase your peace of mind by preparing for emergencies. For example, ask a doctor or physical therapist to demonstrate techniques for getting up after a fall. Using protective devices can also boost your confidence; wearing a plastic hip protector under clothing can reduce the risk of serious injuries from falls. You can order one for \$50-\$65 from Safelign, 877-728-3447. Soft hip pads can also help, but they're much less protective.

Finally, sharing the problem with others can be extremely beneficial. In 1993, Boston University's Center for Enhancement of Late Life Function debuted a program called "A Matter of Balance." Participants met to discuss their fears and trade tips. When a

woman confessed that she avoided the symphony due to her fear, a brainstorming session produced three pages of solutions—such as always getting a ticket for an aisle seat. When a man revealed that he was too intimidated to talk to his doctor about his fear, his peers suggested that he write down his concerns. The program is spreading throughout the U.S. and Canada; to get more details, call 617-353-7373 or visit [www.bu.edu/foybal](http://www.bu.edu/foybal).

Meanwhile, I'm hoping that tai chi will keep me sure-footed. I'm also keeping a clutter-free floor and lifting weights to increase strength. And, oh yes, I'm at the YMCA twice a week, dutifully practicing White Crane Spreads Its Wings, waiting to experience Joyous Breath and Passing Clouds.

*Catherine Gandel is a health writer and is working on a book about the fear of falling.*

and walked shorter distances. At times, her caution seemed logical. After all, being *mindful* of falling (say, by not rushing down steps) is prudent. But gradually, she curtailed her activities beyond all common sense.

Ironically, being overly cautious actually makes the problem worse. Restricting physical activities leads to weakened muscles, says Jonathan Howland, Ph.D., of Boston University School of Medicine, an expert on the

fear of falling. Also, being less active means more time spent alone. That can lead to depression and sometimes the abuse of alcohol or tranquilizers.

Obviously, aging brings changes that can make falls more likely, such as decreased balance and weakened depth perception. Drug side effects and conditions such as Parkinson's disease are culprits, too. But up to 40 percent of falls among people 65 and older are preventable.

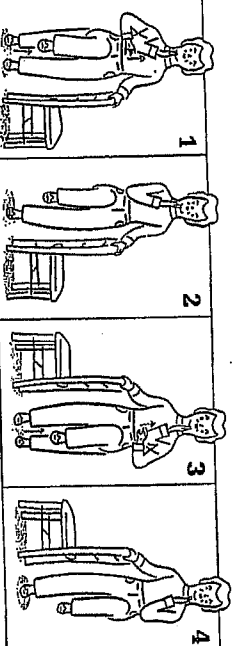
After seeing a doctor to expose any problems that may lead to falling, you should make your home as fall-proof as possible. Cluttered floors, throw rugs, and poor lighting cause thousands of falls, all needless. For example, inexpensive motion-activated lights will brighten a dark hallway.

Mom's house was a minefield of hazards. First of all, she had very few electrical outlets, so her lamp cords stretched across the room—ready to

## Boost Your Balance

**P**racticing tai chi can reduce the fear of falling by strengthening muscles and training your body to maintain balance in a variety of positions. This ancient Chinese dance-exercise uses smooth, easy movements, and it really helps: In a study at Armstrong Atlantic State University in Savannah, Georgia, 45 women (ages 65 to 96) who did 30 minutes of tai chi twice a week for three months not only improved their balance, but also reduced their fear of falling by 30 percent. "Many falls occur when someone is doing one thing and thinking about something else," explains Steven Wolf, Ph.D., of Emory University in Atlanta. "Tai chi helps your balance become automatic, keeping your feet under you when you're distracted. These three moves can be effective balance builders for older persons, says Fuzhong Li, Ph.D., a tai chi researcher at Oregon Research Institute in Eugene. With your doctor's approval, do them twice a day at a slow, even pace and your balance may be noticeably better in one month.

—Kathleen Doherty



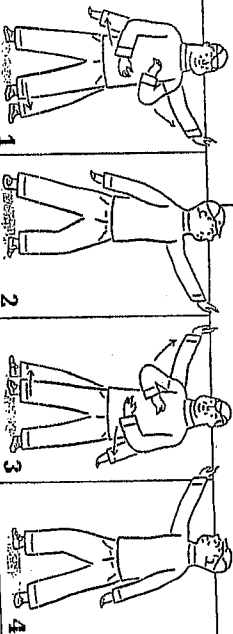
### ▲ Golden Cock

**Stands on One Leg**

(Strengthens leg, pelvic, and back muscles)

1. Position a sturdy chair (without wheels) on your left. Stand with your feet hip-width apart, your right arm slightly bent at the elbow, palm facing down. Hold the chair for support.
2. Shift your weight slowly to the left leg, and raise your right hand and knee in one motion, as if they were attached by

3. puppet strings. Hold this position for 1 second. Lower your hand and knee to return to the starting position. Repeat steps 1 and 2 if it's comfortable.
3. Move the chair to your right side and assume the starting position from step 1 (holding the chair with your right hand).
4. Repeat the move on the opposite side by lifting and lowering your left hand and leg. Gradually work up to doing 3 or 4 repetitions on each side.



### ▲ Warding Off

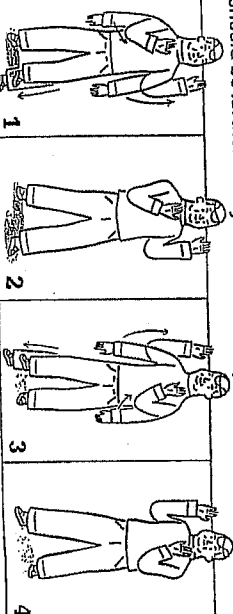
(Improves standing balance)

1. Pretend you are holding a beach ball, with your left palm on top of it and right palm under it. Take a small side step with your left foot (point your toes left). As you do this, sweep your left arm upward (palm out) and your right arm by your right hip, palm facing down. (Imagine you're a cop telling traffic to "Stop!")
2. Hold this pose for a moment. To return to the starting position, rotate your left foot so your toes point forward, and your body will naturally rotate to face forward again. Bring your left foot back under you. Allow your arms to draw inward—but this time end with your right hand on top of the imaginary ball.
3. Repeat to the opposite side. Take a small step with your right foot. Raise your right arm and lower your left.
4. Hold this pose for a second, then reverse the movements to return to the original starting position (left hand on top of the beach ball). Do this move twice. You may wish to work up to doing 3 or 4 repetitions in a row.

### ▼ Working at Shuttle

(Adds stability when striding)

1. Stand comfortably with your knees bent slightly, as shown.
2. Step forward with your left foot and raise both hands in front of your face (palms out), as if you were blocking something in front of you. Your left hand should be farther from your body than the right one.
3. Reverse the move, moving your left foot back while lowering your hands, to return to the starting position.
4. Now, step forward with your right foot, again raising your hands. Your right hand should be in front of the left. Gradually work up to 3 or 4 repetitions.



## **Metairie Institute of Comprehensive Health Newsletter**

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# **Falls**

## **What are the risks of falls?**

The chances of falling increase as you get older. About half the falls older people have are due to accidents, and about half are health-related. Most falls result in a quick recovery. However, some falls, particularly those that result in fractures, cause permanent disability and can even shorten lives.

Falls cause more bone fractures in older people because osteoporosis (weak bones) affects 1 in 4 women age 60 or older and nearly half of all people over age 75. By the age of 90, 1 woman in 4 has fallen and fractured her hip. For people living alone and unable to get up, falls can result in hypothermia (loss of body temperature), pneumonia, and sometimes death. A serious fall often brings about a loss of confidence, fear of falling, and a dependence on others.

## **How do falls occur?**

As you get older, eyesight and hearing decline. Reflexes tend to be slow. There is less coordination and muscle strength to take action in avoiding a fall. Medical conditions like heart disease or low blood pressure can affect balance. Medicines or the use of alcohol may cause lightheadedness. Arthritis can throw you off balance, and osteoporosis can weaken bones so that they break easily. In addition, people often aren't aware of the fall hazards they have in their homes.

## **What are the symptoms that may lead to falls?**

Feelings of dizziness, lightheadedness, or weakness may be present if there is an underlying medical problem. On the other hand, the fall itself may be the first symptom of serious illness, such as a heart attack, stroke, internal bleeding, or pneumonia. It may also be the first sign of a serious drinking problem. A fall that causes a bone fracture may be the first sign of osteoporosis.

## **What should I do after a fall?**

Call your health care provider or your emergency number after a fall, even if there appears to be little or no injury. It is possible to fracture a hip and still be able to get up. Also, head injuries can be very serious. In addition, a fall may be the first symptom of other serious illness. Your health care provider will examine you and may order x-rays or other tests.

## **How can I take care of myself?**

- Have your vision and hearing checked regularly and, if necessary, corrected.
- Increase the lighting in your home, inside and out.
- Use a cane or walker if advised to do so.
- If you are on medicine, take it regularly and as directed.
- Tell your health care provider if you think your medicine affects your balance or causes dizziness.

- If you are overweight, talk to your provider about weight control.
- Exercise daily to keep muscles in tone and help prevent osteoporosis.
- Eat calcium-rich food, such as dairy products and green vegetables, to help prevent osteoporosis.

## Preventing falls in your home

Homes can be full of fall hazards. Common ones include slippery floors, worn rugs and stair treads, furniture in the way, poor lighting, and trailing electric cords.

- Try to have nonslip floors. Use nonskid mats, especially on floors that may get wet.
- Carpet and stair treads should be tacked down firmly. Replace or cover worn areas on carpet or treads.
- Use good lighting. Have light switches at both ends of stairs and hallways.
- Have a small night light on in case you need to get up at night.
- Don't have loose or trailing electric cords across the floors.
- Arrange furniture so it is not in the way when you walk around the house.
- Install grab bars for the bathtub, shower, and toilet.
- Don't use a long bathrobe you can trip over.
- Store food and regularly used items where they can be easily reached.

## Preventing falls in your daily activities

- Get up slowly after lying down or resting. Sit down if you feel lightheaded.
- Wear rubber-soled, low-heeled shoes that fasten securely.
- Eat a healthy, low-fat, balanced diet, with plenty of fiber. Don't go without food.
- Eat three or four smaller meals a day, rather than a single, large meal.
- Exercise daily to keep muscles firm and joints flexible. Stop and rest if you feel faint.
- Limit your use of alcohol.
- Be careful if you have pets that might trip you or push you down when playing.

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Published by McKesson Health Solutions LLC.

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