
Preventing Older Worker Slip-ups

No single activity is the answer for everyone. Look for any kind of low-impact, low embarrassment, low-pain activities that are relatively easy to do, low-risk, and are readily available nearby.

By [Robert Pater](#) | Oct 01, 2015

I recently received an email from Robert Smola, Senior Engineer with American Buildings Company in Alabama: "Just read Robert Pater's OH&S March 2015 article, 'Attentionally Avoiding Traps - and Trips.' I read where balance, especially in older workers, is important in preventing slips, trips, and falls. I wonder if he thought that a good ergonomics program that included stretching exercises would help these older workers be more 'nimble'?"

Here's my expanded my response that I hope may be of use to you, as well:

Balance does weaken as people age, as revealed by "Sway studies." This occurs for numerous physiological and neurological reasons. And, of course, diminished balance can be a direct contributor to more slips, trips, and falls (and to soft-tissue injuries, as well). But this erosion can be stopped and balance considerably strengthened with right practice.

You asked about stretching. While stretching *might* elevate internal awareness of balance, this is likely a roundabout way to improve slip/trip/fall safety. Further, there are no studies that prove that stretching even reduces falls, much less soft-tissue injuries. (And some reports seem to indicate this might have a backfire effect.) And that's assuming exercises are done safely and "correctly." The watchword in Safety, as in medicine, should always be "Above all, do no harm." I've seen several "stretching" implementations out there that can potentially harm more than help. Some possible signals of stretching done poorly: 1. "bouncing," 2. rushing, or 3. doing this as a group activity when there are invariably wide ranges of motion and comfort with stretching. Too often, in attempting to either stay together or "compete" with others' level of flexibility, people can go beyond how far they can safely stretch

at that time and hurt themselves.

Let's zoom out. I think "warmups" (of which stretching is but one type) may help, if done the right way, raising internal body awareness ("proprioception"), extending range of motion or even somewhat helping with balance. Of course, a lot of people—including many older workers—don't like stretching. They may have unpleasant associations from past stretching activities (done "not right"), be uncomfortable/painful when attempting these, or feel unpleasantly tight or limited. In reaction, they often resist, do these half-heartedly, or drop out—any of which reduces this activity's potential positive benefits (which, again, may only have limited applications to preventing slips, trips and falls).

That being noted, there are several powerful techniques adapted from internal martial arts that can very quickly and directly boost balance and increase attention to small adjustments for reducing slips, trips, and falls—but that's beyond what can be conveyed just in print. However, one of the best activities to boost balance is Tai Chi: slow motion forms with minimal impact. There've been numerous studies corroborating the health and safety benefits of practicing Tai Chi, especially in older people. And at the very least, those who practice are unlikely to be injured from participating in this activity. Other potentially useful low-impact methods for elevating balance while moving include different forms of dance (I'm personally drawn to traditional "Kahiko" style hula for both men and women) and even "mindful" walking, where attention is directed to how weight and balance transfers step to step.

In addition to their being low impact, these activities share two common and critical keys for helping prevent slips, trips, and falls: 1. Strengthening the legs to enable them to best support the weight of the entire body (as people age, sarcopenia/age-related muscle loss occurs—unless they compensate by upping their leg-strengthening activity level) and 2. Practicing being "single-weighted," where one leg and foot is ready and capable of supporting the entire body. So should one leg slip out or become "stopped" by a low blockage/trip hazard, the other leg can take the whole weight; if even if one leg buckles or a foot skids or becomes momentarily "trapped," this doesn't have to inevitably lead to a fall.

No single activity is the answer for everyone. Tai chi or hula or other dance or walking may not be for everyone. However, to help prevent slips, trips and potentially devastating falls to older workers, look for any kind of low-impact, low embarrassment, low-pain activities that are relatively easy to do, low-risk, and are readily available nearby.

The ultimate keys here are as much in *how* you engage in balance and muscle

strengthening activities as in *what* you practice. Ten minutes of actual practice per day are better than an hour of watching others doing this on a TV screen.

Yes, both the incidence and severity of slips, trips, and falls can significantly increase with age. But no one person, or company, has to fall into becoming another statistic. Three decades of experience clearly shows that people of any age can greatly, quickly, and enjoyably increase their balance and, along with that, their personal Safety.

About the Author

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