

Elders living a balanced life

"Promoting Active Lifestyles"

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Senior Health & Fitness 2008

By K. Boehm
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Inside an aerobics room, Mary Fernandez holds a tree pose for two minutes.

She lifts dumbbells and raises her legs, but she's not working out in the conventional sense.

She gets out of an office chair, practicing something many people take for granted — balance.

Participants in this new exercise class at the Forever Young Society quest for something far more critical than a swimsuit-ready physique.

Fernandez 64, recently retired and lives alone. She hopes the class protects her from one of her biggest fears — a tumble.

These balance-focused exercises aren't just good for you. They may be the key to independence.

Some have tried yoga, others do water aerobics, many have given strength training a shot.

And some 5,000 people across the country are testing out an new form of accessible *tai chi* that combines Eastern Chinese Medicine traditions with Western Methodology that involves an easy, simple progression of technique. Called **Eas-i-Chi**, (pronounced: *easy chee*) it involves integrating the three balance centers in the body and using a portable, lightweight acupressure walkway. The **Chi-Balance** mat — which simulates walking on a path of rounded river stones — has been practiced barefoot for thousands of years in China. But today, the movement routine is turning spas, parks, backyards and community rooms across South Florida into mini, self-reflexology centers.



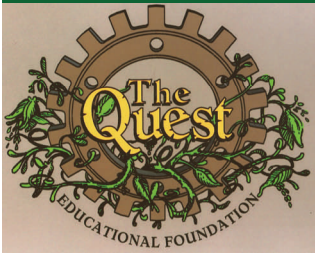
For people above 65, falls are the leading cause of injury-related death, and over 2 million people are treated in the emergency room every year for fall-related injuries, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Each year, nearly one-third of older adults fall.

And those adults who fall are two to three times more likely to fall again within the next year.

With aging, balance can be thrown off-kilter as one balance center in the body takes more of the burden off the other two.

Everything from blood pressure to bone density to vision, mental clarity and general health can impact balance. As people get older, they lose muscle and become more sedentary. But getting wobbly doesn't have to be a given, according to doctors who say simply taking a 20-minute daily walk can build stability. And patients who do fall can benefit from regular exercise and can more quickly bounce



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back after an accident, according to one therapeutic counselor, Randy Eady, who is a former Professor of Behavioral Science at the US Air Force Academy and has worked with disabled veterans for nearly 10 years.

Eady said therapeutic counseling involves filling the gap where medicare/medicaid leaves off and therapy is still useful. By offering cost-savings, self-directed physical activity routines that integrate with a "recreation therapy model" he drastically improves natural movement security.

For example, a participant in one of his public programs had suffered a stroke and expected to be laid up for several weeks, even months. "His care-giver brought him into our class and the fellow, who was an avid jogger, was up and on the walkway within a couple of days. At the three-week checkup, he started walking all five step routines for the prescribed 15 minutes," underscored Eady.

Inside a day spa in Boca Raton, half-a-dozen women saunter repeatedly over the mats as they stroll by to the numerous treatment rooms in Studio 7.

Eady explains to owner, Tanya Collazo, "using a five step routine in 15-minutes or less covers all the sensory points on the bottom of the feet" and stimulates a unique form of detoxification that is clinically proven to help people wobbly on their feet."



Vincent Nardi another spa owner likes how it complements his organic hair-styling by giving his patrons a "tingly from head to toe feeling." Nardi, who often takes to the cobblestones in his house, believes it's good for just about everybody — "the ones looking to give themselves a little, unique workout and for those recovering from an injury or those simply looking to feel more energetic."

Kathy, a 53-year-old former marathon runner, turned to inline-skating after pain in both knees got so bad. Running, she said, "just hurts." But she found that skating -- while gentler on her body -- required some balance system tuning up.

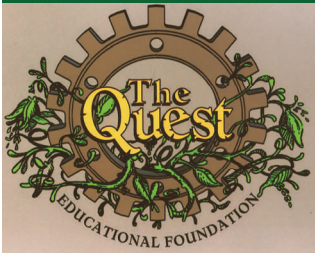
Three weeks on the mat and a few "Dance of Skate" classes later and she's hooked.

She mat walks five days a week, for 15 minutes before skating for about half an hour. She knows the walkway and movement class improves her posture, breathing and gives her a boost with balance.

"Not everyone can skate, but I want everyone to walk," described Eady, who teaches classes across a tri-county area in Southeast Florida. And, he means it. Dubbed a man on a mission by students that recognize his passion, "I want to eliminate walkers and training wheels from the vocabulary," he exclaimed.

Back at South County Regional Park in Palm Beach County, Eady takes two ladies that were using walkers for support and has them begin to walk over the cobblestones. "I've seen people improve balance and coordination so quickly that they are **mobility-stander** (what he calls a walker) **free** in less than a month. For a lot of folks it can just be a matter of determination and practice, " he adds.

Mary Fernandez started taking the Eas-i-Chi balance class about six months ago after she noticed she was dropping things around the house. She also struggled a bit to get in and out of her comfy sofa.



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But the class, she said, is helping her build muscle, balance and confidence. She remembers the first class, she couldn't hold the tree pose for more than a couple of seconds, without her foot falling to the ground. Now, she goes nearly two minutes with just a couple of pats.

Roz Sitzler, 74 said she likes the way she feels after class.

"It brings me energy and makes me feel good," said Sitzler of Boca Raton. And with that, she strolled out of class, one steady step at a time.

STATISTICS

As of 2006, the most recent year for which statistics are available, more than 15,800 people 65 and older died of fall-related injuries. Another 1.8 million people were treated in emergency departments for injuries related to a fall. The total direct cost for falls among older adults in 2000 was about \$19 billion. This cost is expected to reach \$43.8 billion by 2020 because of the number of aging baby boomers.

Source: CDC

CLASS INFORMATION

Eas-i-Chi balance classes: For information, call 561-477-5153

or go to <http://gliderrider.com/easi-chi/default.htm>

Balance walking: For information and classes,

go to <http://gliderrider.com/easi-chi/default.htm>

TIPS FOR REDUCING FALLS

- ⇒ Exercise regularly. Exercise programs such as tai chi that increase strength and improve balance are especially good.
- ⇒ Review medications with doctor to reduce side effects and interactions.
- ⇒ Have eyes checked at least once a year.
- ⇒ At home, improve lighting and reduce hazards such as rugs and runners that tend to slide.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Randy Eady, M.Ed, a former professor and counselor in Behavioral Sciences and Leadership at the USAF Academy, CO, is a big proponent of the wellness benefits of leisure recreation and integrative exercise. He's an intergenerational balance and coordination specialist who conducts Balance Bookends movement classes for the young (between the age of 4-9) and those "young at heart" hovering around 60. He's designed a curriculum pack (The Glider Rider Flight Plan) and booklet (Tommy and Grandpa Learn to Ride) to supplement his Glider Rider Series of Youth and Mature Adult Balance and Coordination Learning and Refinement Bikes.

He has consulted with the Consortium of Geriatric Research, Education and Clinical Centers of the Veterans Affairs Medical Centers (GRECC-VA), the National Council on Aging and the American Society on Aging. His work assists health care professionals implement socially facilitated, multi-generational wellness programs directed at leg muscle strength as the #1 factor in physical health for older populations. You can find out more about his classes at Generations United (www.gu.org).