

A matter of balance

Prevent falls with flexibility, strength and balance. *by Karen Giles-Smith*

Last year when Millie Dibble was 89 years old, she tripped on the sidewalk and fell while walking home from the grocery store. She suffered broken bones and knocked-out teeth, but because she was healthy and fit, she recovered quickly. She had been walking every day since 1981 and was taking a “strength and conditioning” class. The fall didn’t keep Dibble down; it woke her up. “I realized I needed to do more for my balance,” she says.

Dibble signed up for the A Matter of Balance class at the Sam Corey Senior Center in Holt. A Matter of Balance is an eight-week evidence-based fall prevention program that includes exercise demonstrations and addresses topics such as the fear of falling, faulty habits that can increase the risk of falling, and when a cane or walker is necessary. Participants perform the guided exercises either seated or standing, using a chair for support.

“The class has really helped me a lot,” says Dibble. “It’s good for me.” She says the exercises have improved her balance and helped her overall. “We walk a line, heel to toe, for 10 steps forward and 10 steps back. And we turn side to side with our eyes closed.” The class has also made her aware of environmental hazards that can cause falls. “Don’t leave newspapers and magazines on the floor,” she says. “I used to do that.”

The class instructor is Jane Braatz, PhD, A Matter of Balance master trainer. Braatz says most participants take the class because they’ve noticed that they’re having problems with balance and are concerned. “Many aren’t able to do what they used to do. They limit their activity because they’re afraid of falling. But the fear of falling can be as bad as the risk of falling.” Decreased mobility can lead to less social contact, lower quality of life and depression.

“We normally lose some balance as we age, but there are things we can do to maintain strength and flexibility which will help with balance,” says Braatz. “Hips and ankles are key areas to keep strong and flexible. If we lose our balance, we use our hips and ankles to re-stabilize. And ankle strength is needed to roll your foot from heel to toe when you walk and to pick up your toes so you won’t trip.” Exercises such as heel raises,



A Matter of Balance class participants engage in exercises to improve strength, flexibility and balance.



toe raises, balancing on one foot and calf stretches are helpful.

Braatz suggests participating in a variety of physical activities to help find your “balance points.” She says it’s easier to maintain balance than to re-find it, so working on strength and flexibility in our 40s and 50s will make a difference in the long run. To locate classes to improve strength, flexibility and balance, check with your local hospital, YMCA or other fitness facilities.

Now 90 years old, Dibble is still going strong. She swims laps at the YMCA twice a week, takes an exercise class three times a week, walks every afternoon, and attends the A Matter of Balance class once a week. She uses a cane when walking on carpeting and outdoors, just to be safe. “I would recommend A Matter of Balance to anyone,” she says. “When I first started the class, I couldn’t stand on one leg without hanging onto a chair. Now, on most days, I can stand on one leg for a count of 30. It’s helped me be able to do more things.”

In fact, Dibble went white-water rafting this past summer.

Karen Giles-Smith, MS, RD, is a registered dietitian and freelance writer based in Mason, Michigan. Visit her Web site and blog at www.TheWellnessWriter.com