

Balance Training

The importance of incorporating balance training into your workouts.

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The importance of incorporating nutritional balance when maintaining a physically active lifestyle is important. Nutrition must provide an energy balance and a nutrient balance – energy balance existing in the ratio of caloric intake to activity level and nutrient balance existing in the types of foods consumed (proteins, fats, carbohydrates, etc.). Another type of balance that is equally important to a physically active lifestyle, yet often overlooked, is balance training.

When most people hit the gym to get in a workout, they tend to focus on two things: cardio and strength training. Both of course have their place and with the proper execution, show results. However, there are more than just treadmill runs and weight machines to getting in shape. Whether you are training for an athletic competition or looking to maintain or lose weight, you should consider incorporating balance training into your fitness regime. Balance training has numerous benefits, two of the main being injury prevention and improvement in developing muscle strength.

Injury Prevention

Injuries can happen to anyone while they are engaged in a fitness routine. They are not reserved for athletes only, and in order to get the most of your fitness routine, you want to stay injury free so you are not limited by pain, the need to rest, or even the need for surgery. Research has specifically shown that adding balance training to workouts reduces the risk of serious knee injuries, including ACL injuries, which are the main cause of permanent sports or fitness related disability. Ankles also benefit from balance training. A sprained ankle is the most common injury sustained by athletes and even among people engaging in everyday activities. Ankle sprains occur and reoccur because of failures in ankle flexibility and strength, but it is a fundamental loss of balance and control in the entire leg that precedes most ankle injuries. Training balance can reinforce the protective, proprioceptive (meaning your awareness of the position of your body) mechanisms in the leg and decrease the chances of serious injury.

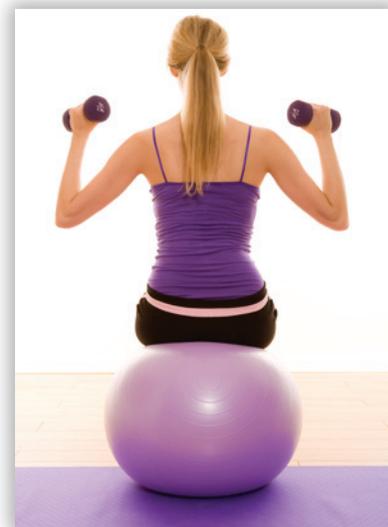
Improving Muscle Development

Beyond injury prevention, you can increase your muscle strength by incorporating exercises that test and improve your balance. Much focus in fitness training is core strength. Athletes rely on their core as their power source for strength and athletic movement. Beyond athletes, a flat stomach and defined abs is generally at the top of the list for goals related to fitness and health. By including balance challenges into a training or workout session, you are adding even more of a core challenge. When our bodies are off balance we immediately and unconsciously turn to our stabilizers muscles and our core to get our balance back. If you stand on one foot you'll notice

how your muscles engage in the standing leg and in your core to help you stay balanced. From that alone, you can easily see how challenging your body with balance training can improve your core strength and better develop those muscles. Other muscle groups benefit from balance training as well since balance exercises are often wrapped up in strength training, in the form of movements that focus on moving, stretching and toning muscles. Yoga and Pilates each include a major focus on balance with body poses and stretches. If yoga isn't your thing, you can simply make any exercise include balance challenges by making it a one-legged resistance exercise.

Balance Exercises

- Squats (one or two legged)
- Calf Raises (one or two legged)
- Jump Rope (one or two legged)
- Lunges (one or two legged)
- Plyometric Jumping
- Free weight exercises, such as overhead press, while sitting on an stability ball



All the above incorporate balance into the exercise, as will anything that concentrates on one side of the body — standing on one leg or supporting the body on one leg and one straight arm while in a horizontal position, for example. Also, doing any of these exercises while using balance bands, balance discs or BOSU balls, or stability balls are easy alterations to your workout to improve balance.

If strength training and cardio is already something you are focusing on at the gym, incorporating balance training can easily be added to your routine and it should not be overlooked. Making balance training a focus in your workouts is an easy way to get more out of your workout and reach your fitness goals. For most, all it takes is simply thinking outside your normal weight room habits and adding one-legged variations of exercises or utilizing the fitness tools around you, such as bands and stability balls. The time it takes to challenge yourself in regards to balance is minimal and the results will prove to be well worth the minor changes to your routine.

Kimberly is the Head Women's Volleyball Coach at Chestnut Hill College, located in Philadelphia PA. She also coaches high school athletes who compete on travel volleyball teams. She has worked with numerous athletes of various ages and levels to help them achieve their maximum potential. When not helping and teaching others as a coach, she enjoys challenging herself in the gym and looks forward to a Java Jolt smoothie after a good work out!

