

## Too Fit to Fracture, Part 3

# Balance challenges keep you on your feet

by *Lora Giangregorio, PhD*

**A**fter the age of 40, we lose 0.5% to 1% of the bone mass in our skeleton each year. A diagnosis of osteoporosis means that bones have weakened to the point where they could break from a simple fall.

Osteoporosis affects about 1.4 million Canadians. One in three women and one in five men over the age of 50 will have a fracture due to osteoporosis at some point, often caused by a fall. Fractures can lead to other health problems and loss of function, or independence.

### **Building balance to prevent falls and fractures**

About one in three older adults who still live in their own homes report at least one fall in the past year. Exercises that challenge balance have been shown to prevent falls. Incorporate things that challenge your balance into your daily life or exercise routine. For instance, during your daily walk, switch to some unusual walking patterns, such as alternating between brisk stepping, long strides, and side-stepping.

Walk heel to toe – like on an imaginary tightrope – on the way back from the rest room. Do step-ups, one leg at a time onto a high step. Dancing offers good balance challenges too. Give yourself enough of a challenge that you have to work to stay on your feet, while taking precautions to reduce your risk of falling. Wear appropriate footwear, and progress the challenges slowly.

You can do balance challenges while watching TV or waiting for the microwave. In fact, forward, backward or side lunges are a good way to both build strength in your legs and challenge your balance at the same time. *Clock Yourself* is a new app designed by a physical therapist to provide balance challenges in 3 minutes per day. It introduces progressively more complex activities to train you to think on our feet and to react quickly.



It takes time to make new exercise habits. Pick one new exercise habit. Plan when you are going to do it. Write it down. When you master it, add a new one. The small habits you create now can prevent falls and broken bones later.

#### *About the author*

**Dr. Lora Giangregorio** is an Associate Professor of Kinesiology at the University of Waterloo. She is also the Schlegel Research Chair in Mobility and Aging. Her research program focuses on strategies to reduce the risk of fracture, and increase physical activity and mobility in older adults. Lora translates her research into practice by working with government and non-profit organizations and linking with community-based programs. She collaborated with Osteoporosis Canada to develop the Too Fit to Fracture exercise recommendations.