

Exercise is crucial to keep the elderly on their feet

Flexibility, strength, balance:
Workouts can help prevent
disabling — even deadly — falls

BY BROOKE ADAMS
The Salt Lake Tribune

Alice Marsh makes her way to the AgeWell Center three times each week to work on her flexibility and strength.

Experts say that will help keep the 73-year-old Salt Lake woman on her feet, literally.

Exercise that focuses on flexibility, strength and balance are key to preventing falls that can be life altering or even deadly. Yet, many older adults don't make time to exercise, losing both stability and balance as they age.

And that increases their risk of falling.

That is why gerontologist and physical therapist Paul Holbrook has incorporated a balance and mobility class in the slate of offerings at his newly opened AgeWell Center.

The center is the latest extension of Holbrook's work, which for the past 12 years has focused on helping older adults keep fit or overcome potentially disabling conditions.

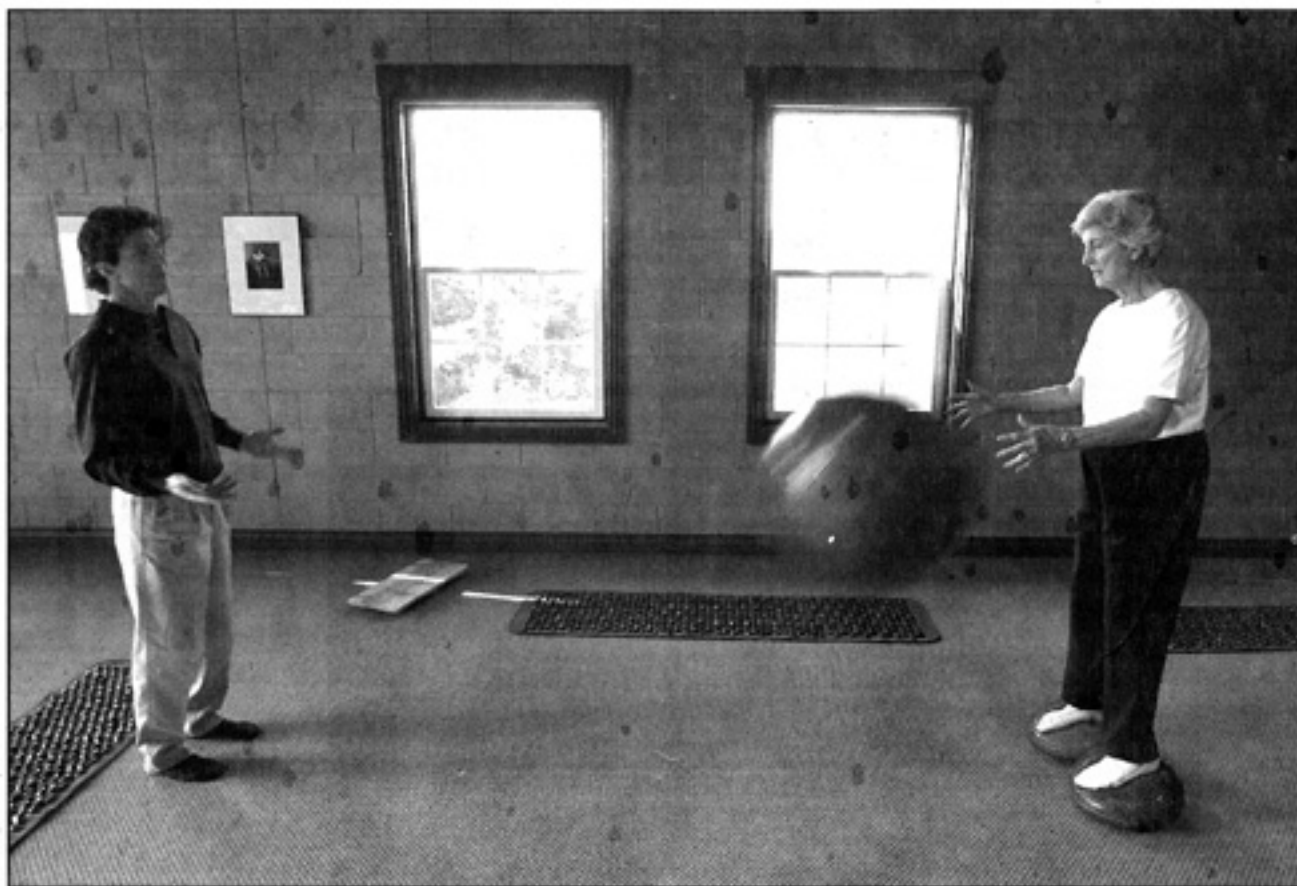
Designed for adults age 50 and older, the AgeWell Center offers individual and group classes in strength training, balance and flexibility exercises and relaxation techniques. The average age of Holbrook's clients is 75.

Located in a strip mall in southeast Salt Lake City, the center is the antithesis of the modern workout gym. The walls are olive and deep purple, the background music is more apt to be Sinatra than the Sex Pistols and the pneumatic resistance machines are easy on the joints. There isn't a single television screen in sight, either.

"It is really about changing the way we age," says Holbrook. "I'm trying to empower them to age differently and take more care of their health."

"The medical community has done well extending the life span. Here, we are trying to expand the health span to match the life span," he says.

Holbrook's balance and mobility class is based on the highly regarded FallProof! program developed by Debra



FRANCISCO KOHLSETH/The Salt Lake Tribune

Alice Marsh balances on rubber discs while tossing a ball to gerontologist and physical therapist Paul Holbrook at the AgeWell Center.

J. Rose. It uses balance discs, wobble boards, a flat agility ladder, a balance pad, balance ball and cobblestone walk pads to develop agility and improve balance.

"Part of the loss of balance is losing muscle mass, losing the ability to move," says Holbrook.

Anxiety and fear of falling may set in as a person gets less confident about maintaining his or her balance.

"If we can break that cycle by giving them strength and confidence, with better balance, they are going to be out more, active and living a wellness life."

Researchers have found that activities such as those offered at the AgeWell Center really can make a difference in a person's ability to avoid a fall. A California study, for instance, found a 41 percent reduction in falls within three months of beginning an exercise

Where to look for help

● **The AgeWell Center** is at 2670 S. 2000 East, Suite 205, in Salt Lake City. For more information on its programs, call 467-6554.

● **Senior Centers** also offer activities that promote balance and coordination. To see what's available in your area, visit the Web at <http://www.55plusbook.org> and search for "senior centers."

program based on the FallProof! program.

The National Institute on Aging says that exercise can improve the health regardless of age, frailty or disease. And if you should fall, having more muscle and stronger bones could help reduce injury.

"You are able to respond quicker and you've got muscle and joint stability to prevent further damage and to come through surgery and recovery if

needed," Holbrook says.

Plus, exercise also helps improve mental and emotional functioning.

The Canyon Ranch Guide to Living Younger Longer suggests activities such as tennis, cycling, tai chi and social dance to develop and maintain balance. Pilates, yoga and chi gong also are highly recommended.

Most local senior centers offer activities from Tai Chi to ping pong, line and ballroom dancing, yoga and walking

How physical activities can improve health, quality of life

● **Endurance** — By increasing your breathing and heart rate, you can improve your stamina for everyday living tasks.

● **Strength** — Building muscle ensures you can continue to do things on your own.

● **Balance** — Better balance helps prevent falls, which can be disabling or deadly.

● **Flexibility** — A limber body may make you less likely to be hurt if you fall and allow you to continue physical activities; it also may improve your ability to recover from injury.

● **Free copies** of *Exercise: A Guide from the National Institute on Aging* are available, in English and Spanish, by calling 1-800-222-2225.

— Source: *The National Institute on Aging*

classes.

Not up to that? Start small and simple: Try stepping over cracks along a sidewalk as you walk or standing on one leg at a time (with a hip against a counter if needed) to practice agility and balance.

Alice Marsh, who has trained with Holbrook for about a decade, credits his workouts with giving her husband Howard more — and better quality — years.

Howard, who died in September at age 80, had congestive heart failure and was more a thinker than an exercise buff. But Holbrook got him moving — using a recumbent bicycle and stability and balance exercises — in the five years before he passed.

"If it didn't extend his life, the quality of his life improved," she says.

Alice Marsh says her workouts have eased her own arthritis and bursitis. "It's truly amazing," she says. "My joints are really working well and I have little discomfort."

And she is steady on her feet.

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