

# PROOF

## FROM THE EXPERTS

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### Training for Your Next Decade: Why Strength, Power, and Balance Matter After Age 55

By Brian Richards, PT, DPT



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Falls are the leading cause of injury-related death among adults over the age of 65, and more than three million older adults are treated in emergency departments each year for fall-related injuries.

While falls may seem to come out of nowhere, they are rarely the result of a single moment. More often, they occur after gradual declines in strength, power, dynamic balance, and reaction time over many years.

Understanding these changes – and how to train them – can help individuals maximize physical ability and maintain independence later in life.

#### Strength vs. Power

Most people understand the importance of strength as they age. Strength allows us to perform tasks such as rising from a chair, climbing stairs, or carrying groceries.

However, muscle power – the ability to produce force quickly – declines at a faster rate than strength alone.

This distinction matters because everyday life often requires quick reactions. When someone trips or slips, the body must respond by taking a quick step and stabilizing balance. Without adequate muscle power, recovering from a loss of balance becomes much more difficult.

Because power declines more rapidly, many adults may still feel “strong enough”

for daily tasks while noticing slower reactions or reduced ability to recover from a misstep.

For this reason, training that includes quick movements against resistance plays a significant role in sustaining power and reducing fall risk.

#### Balance Is More Than Standing Still

When people think about balance training, they often picture standing on one leg or holding a pose. While helpful, real-life balance challenges are far more dynamic.

Many falls occur during movement – while turning, stepping around obstacles, reaching, or navigating uneven ground.

Effective balance training often includes:

- Multi-directional stepping and changes in direction
- Agility movements combining speed and accuracy
- Training on variable or uneven surfaces
- Practicing recovery from small disturbances

These exercises train the body to react and stabilize during movement, not just in static positions.

#### Why Walking Isn't Enough

Walking is one of the most common forms of physical activity and provides important cardiovascular benefits. However, walking alone typically does not provide enough stimulus to improve strength or power.

For the body to adapt, exercise must challenge it beyond normal daily activity. Without reaching this threshold, improvements in strength, power, and reaction time are blunted.

As a result, individuals who want to reach high functional levels require training that targets specific muscles and nerves responsible for producing force quickly and responding to changes in movement.

Encouragingly, adults in their 60s, 70s, and even 80s can still make meaningful improvements when training is applied appropriately.

#### The Role of Individualized Training

While general exercise is beneficial, meaningful improvements in strength, power, and balance require a challenging stimulus.

If exercises are too easy, the body has little reason to adapt. If too difficult, the risk of injury increases.

Structured programs help strike this balance by gradually progressing difficulty while maintaining safety. This allows individuals to train to the level needed to stimulate improvement.

In many cases, this type of training is difficult to implement alone. Professional guidance can help ensure exercises are both effective and safe.

Over time, this approach allows individuals to improve strength, reaction time, and movement confidence while minimizing unnecessary risk.

#### Looking Ahead

Aging does not mean physical capability must inevitably decline. The body retains a remarkable ability to adapt when challenged appropriately.

Programs that combine strength, power, and dynamic balance training appear particularly effective. Research shows that structured exercise programs can reduce falls in older adults by roughly one-third.

The goal of training is not simply to stay active, but to develop the physical capacity needed for daily life – whether that means walking confidently outdoors, climbing stairs, traveling, playing pickleball, or keeping up with family.

With the right approach, many of these abilities can continue improving well beyond what most people expect.

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Brian Richards, PT, DPT, is the founder of **PEAK LONGEVITY PT**. Dr. Richards completed advanced geriatric residency training at the Louis Stokes Cleveland VAMC and specializes in in-home longevity training for adults 55+.



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