

# KEEPING BALANCE

## Extra effort taking place to help reduce fall risks

By Erika Prins Simonds | LiveWell Correspondent

As a young mother and registered nurse, Mary Ann Wilson, who had never been particularly fit, began taking an aerobics class in Spokane. This was the “Jane Fonda Workout” era, when everyone was “bouncing off the walls,” as Wilson puts it. It was a total game changer for her: dancing to a beat, exercise suddenly felt like a mini-vacation instead of a chore.

“For one hour every day, I just forgot about everything else I had to do. Kids were taken care of and I just took care of my body. It was fun because we did it to music,” she said.

Aerobics soon became more than a break from the daily grind—she became an instructor and eventually began developing her own programs. But she wasn’t satisfied teaching the classes she loved so much.

“I just kept realizing there were so many people who couldn’t do the original kind of exercise that I was doing,” she said. As a nurse specializing in rehabilitation and geriatric care, Wilson instead applied the aerobics fad’s energy to classes for seniors and people with limited mobility.

In consultation with doctors and physical therapists, she devised a program centered around bodily

awareness and incremental strength-building, launching the public television show “Sit and Be Fit” in 1985. The half-hour program focuses on seated workouts—set to music, of course. The show remains a staple for PBS broadcasting, including local stations in Spokane and North Idaho, and the “Sit and Be Fit” website offers a host of resources for seniors to maintain balance, strength and agility, and to prevent falls.

For seniors, preventing falls is the name of the game for staying active and mobile. A simple stumble can turn into a devastating fall resulting in cascading health problems, but daily exercises can improve bodily awareness, posture, strength and balance—and help with recovery in the case of a fall.

“Our reaction time as we age slows down so we’re not as quick to correct ourselves if we start falling,” says Wilson. “It really gets to be an expensive—not just expensive in money but also expensive in just their general well-being and losing independence.”

One in five falls by people over 65 years old result in a more serious injury, like a broken bone or head injury, and the first fall is often indicative of more to



When asked to describe a simple workout for fall prevention, Mary Ann Wilson starts at the beginning: getting out of bed.

"When you get out of bed in the morning, you don't want to just jump out of bed," she said. "Orient yourself back to the room. Look right, look left, take a deep breath. If your feet are flat on the floor, just wiggle your toes."

Bend from the hip, push down on your heels and push your body up from there. Once standing, orient yourself again, she says, and make sure your head and shoulders are over your center of gravity rather than hunched forward.

Another exercise simply consists of shifting one's balance from hip to hip while seated, which mimics the motion needed to get up and down from a chair or the toilet.

A third employs the same balancing act, but standing on one's feet. Here, the practitioner transitions over time from simply shifting balance to lifting the knee up and balancing on one leg.

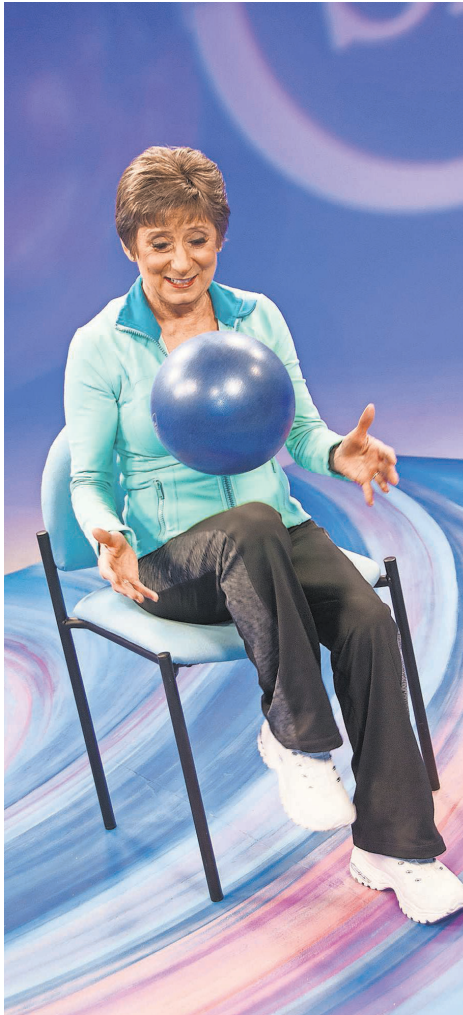
"You don't just rush into it—you want to feel it. You want to feel that you are in control of that leg, your feet, your whole body," Wilson said. "I think awareness is the biggest thing especially as we age. We all get out of touch with our bodies, but particularly when we've lived 70, 80, 90 years, you don't think about that. We don't think about our bodies, we just go."

**For more information:**

**Fit and Fall Proof:**  
[panhandlehealthdistrict.org](http://panhandlehealthdistrict.org)

**Sit and Be Fit:**  
[sitandbenefit.org](http://sitandbenefit.org)

**Spokane Regional Health District  
& Fall Free Coalition:**  
[srhd.org](http://srhd.org)



The PBS program "Sit and Be Fit" still is popular with viewers. Mary Ann Wilson has been a long advocate of encouraging all ages to keep physically active. Photos courtesy Mary Ann Wilson

come. As local and national health experts become increasingly aware of the risks associated with falls for seniors, more programs like "Sit and Be Fit" have become available, including free and low-cost programs at local community centers, medical facilities and retirement communities.

Seniors can take fall prevention classes called Fit and Fall Proof through the Panhandle Health District in North Idaho. The free classes, run by volunteers, include exercises to improve strength, flexibility, mobility and balance specifically aimed at reducing falls—but the benefits far exceed fall prevention: According to the Health District, nearly 70 percent of participants experienced improved physical functions like daily living and walking, and even more reported increased energy and mental health.

The Spokane Regional Health District leads the Fall Free Coalition, a network of resources for helping seniors prevent falls. Using the Fall Free Coalition's resources, seniors can find community centers in Spokane that offer exercise classes for seniors free or at low cost, plus free medication reviews, independent living assessments and more.

The coalition supports local fitness classes including Stay Active and Independent for Life (SAIL) and Balance Enhancement Training by training instructors. SAIL, developed by one of Wilson's former colleagues, employs a similar energetic, music-based approach to exercise and incorporates chairs into the workout.