

# balance

## If You Only Do One Exercise...

A SINGLE MOVE CAN MAKE YOU FEEL MILES BETTER. TRY ONE OF THESE TO MEET A HEALTH GOAL—OR COMBINE THEM FOR YOUR NEW FAVORITE WORKOUT.

By Pam LeBlanc and Anna Maltby

TOO MANY OF US MOVE through the world in a body that feels less than great: Maybe you walk around rubbing a sore shoulder or you snap-crackle-pop your way out of chairs. Maybe you're just generally dragging. Of course, if you have an injury or a medical condition, you should consult your doctor about the best course of action. But if you're experiencing run-of-the-mill rustiness, it may be that your workout regimen—however intense or minimal it is—is missing a key exercise that will help you move with ease and feel great. Ahead, a few suggestions. For each, use your core and breathe deeply. Oh, and if you combine them all, you'll get an excellent workout—and you might just feel a little bit amazing.



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### To walk with less discomfort... try glute bridges.

**WHAT TO DO:** Lie on your back with knees bent and heels just barely brushing fingertips. Squeeze your glutes and push your feet into the floor to lift your hips high, creating a straight line from shoulders to knees. Lower your hips back to the floor. Perform 10 reps, rest, and do another one or two sets.

**WHY THEY HELP:** If you spend many hours a day sitting, your glutes—the large muscles in your rear end—can become weak, while the hip flexor muscles on the front of your hips get extra tight from being in a shortened position. When you stand, those tight hip flexors may start to scream, and without powerful glutes, muscles in your back may compensate to help you walk, causing pain and imbalance. It all happens because most people sit with their lower back

slumped, says Dixie Stanforth, PhD, a senior lecturer in the Department of Kinesiology and Health Education at the University of Texas at Austin. “Your lower back should have a slight curve or arch in it, but with most people, gravity takes over and their chair sucks them in. That puts a tremendous load on the lower back and hips.” A glute bridge strengthens the gluteus maximus and hamstrings, which helps counter this imbalance, and provides a nice opening for tight hip flexors. Here’s a tip: When you get up from your desk to stretch, reach your chest toward the ceiling rather than folding down to touch your toes. That will help your spine find its natural alignment again.



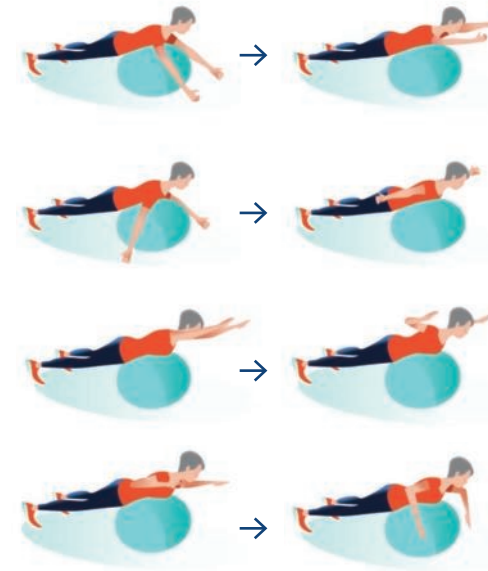
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### To have more energy... try (beginner) burpees.

**WHAT TO DO:** Stand tall, then crouch down to place your hands on the ground near your feet. Step or jump your feet back into a high plank position, then step or jump your feet forward to meet your hands again. Stand, extending fully at the hips. To increase the challenge, add a push-up when you reach plank position, and jump into the air when you return to standing from the crouch. Perform 10 reps, rest, and do another one or two sets.

**WHY THEY HELP:** Burpees are the exercise everyone loves to hate. But there are plenty of reasons to just plain love them: They challenge your whole body, strengthening everything from your quads, glutes, and hamstrings to your arms and chest, which might make you a

little more eager to spring out of bed and leap over tall buildings. And they mimic get-down-on-the-ground and get-up-again movements you use in everyday life. “Learning how to get down and get back up is a good functional pattern,” says Stanforth. Just do burpees carefully—no need to jump if you don’t feel confident doing so—and maintain good alignment in your spine even as you crouch.



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### To prevent shoulder injury... try I's, T's, Y's, and W's.

**WHAT TO DO:** Lie on your stomach on an exercise ball, with your hands grazing the ground in front of you. Squeeze your shoulder blades together to extend your arms with your thumbs pointing up toward the ceiling, framing your head with your upper arms, and then slowly lower—that’s an I. Then extend your arms straight out to the sides—that’s a T. Then extend your arms in a Y shape and bend your elbows, pulling them back toward your sides. Finally, bend your elbows with palms facing down, then lower your hands, keeping upper arms in place—that’s a W. Do 10 reps of one letter before moving on to the next, initiating each movement from your

shoulder blades and mid-back and being careful not to let the tops of your shoulders shrug up toward your ears. Rest and repeat.

**WHY THEY HELP:** Our shoulders are among the most commonly injured parts of our bodies. One reason: Because of habitually poor posture, we often have a tight chest with weak, overstretched muscles around our shoulder blades. These are the muscles that *should* be pulling our shoulders back and down into the proper, safe position, says Kelsey Graham, an assistant professor in the Exercise Science Department and director of personal training at San Diego Mesa College. “Those I’s, T’s, Y’s, and W’s help strengthen the back of the shoulder and the muscles around the shoulder blade, reducing risk of injury,” she says.



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### To have a happier back... try rows.

**WHAT TO DO:** Stand with a medium-weight dumbbell in each hand (start with five to seven pounds and increase if it feels too easy). Hinge at the hips to bring your torso parallel to the ground (or slightly above parallel), keeping your spine in good alignment—bend your knees slightly if needed. With palms facing each other, pull the dumbbells toward your torso, driving your elbows behind you and keeping arms close to your sides. Slowly lower. Perform 10 reps, rest, and do one or two more sets.

**WHY THEY HELP:** Back pain and discomfort can stem from past sports injuries, poor posture, or

inactivity. Strengthening the back’s most important muscles can help you recover from old injuries, improve your posture, and keep your spinal cord healthy. And rows, which can be performed with dumbbells, cables, kettlebells, or elastic tubing, do just that. “Most people are really good at pushing and doing things in the front but need to spend more time pulling and doing stuff behind them,” says Stanforth.



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### To finish your workout quickly... try push-ups.

**WHAT TO DO:** Start in a high plank position, with your hands slightly wider than your shoulders. Rest your knees on the ground, putting your weight on the fleshy part just above the kneecap. Rotate your hands slightly toward each other to protect the wrists. Ensure that your hips and shoulders are in line—don't let your stomach sag or raise your butt in the air. Brace your core, and then bend your elbows to lower your body in one piece, going as far down as you can. Then push back up. To make it easier, perform the exercise with your hands on a bench or the wall. To make it harder, take your knees off the ground so you're on hands and feet.

**WHY THEY HELP:** Push-ups use nearly every muscle in your body—the arms, shoulders, and chest for lowering and lifting, and

the core and lower body for stabilizing. You even get a bit of cardio, since the heart has to work hard to deliver blood to all those muscles at once. The key is to do push-ups properly, which many of us don't, says Stanforth. To push up like a pro, keep your shoulders stable (squeeze the blades back and downward), engage your core as if you were bracing for a punch, and avoid letting your rear end lift or “rolling” your body up and down rather than moving in a solid line. If you find yourself doing something wacky, that's a sign you need to modify—rest assured that push-ups are still incredibly effective when done elevated or on your knees, as long as they're performed correctly, says Graham.



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### To feel great as you age... try squats.

**WHAT TO DO:** Stand with feet about hip-width apart. Send your hips slightly back, and then bend your knees to “sit” as deeply as possible, ideally reaching at least parallel. Keep your heels drilled into the ground and your knees driving out. Return to standing. Perform 10 reps, rest, and do one or two more sets.

**WHY THEY HELP:** Kinesiologists call squatting a “primal movement pattern”—one that, if you can continue doing it throughout your life, will help you maintain mobility and independence. “You need to be able to sit down in a chair and get up from a chair well. You need to be able to go up and down stairs. You need to be able to bend down and pick something up off the ground,” says Graham. Adding squats to your routine can keep you doing

all those things—and ultimately help you maintain your independence in the bathroom, get in and out of bed on your own, and get down on the ground to play with your grandkids or pets as you grow older. “Every able-bodied person on the planet should be doing squats,” says Stanforth. If you aren't able to reach parallel or lower down without your knees bothering you or caving in, work your way up by doing chair squats—squat down toward a chair and let your butt tap the seat (or even sit down if needed), and then stand back up. Or hold on to a countertop, a railing, or the back of a sturdy chair lightly with one or both hands for support on your way down and back up.