

5 Warning Signs Your Body Is Losing Ground

And what they mean for your independence

By Dr. Adina Verrett, PT, DPT

After more than 30 years as a physical therapist, I've seen the same pattern again and again: the people who lose their independence didn't lose it all at once. It happened gradually, through small compensations and quiet avoidances that nobody named — until it was much harder to reverse. These five signs are what I watch for. They're not catastrophic. They're early. And that's exactly why they matter.

SIGN 01

You've Stopped Getting on the Floor

Not because you planned to. It just stopped happening. No reaching for things you dropped, no playing with grandchildren at ground level, no reaching under the bed without a tool. This isn't laziness — it's your nervous system quietly routing around a movement it no longer trusts.

— Clinically, losing floor confidence is one of the earliest indicators of fall risk and functional decline in adults over 60.

SIGN 02

Getting Out of Low Chairs or Car Seats Has Become a Project

You scope it out first. You position your hands. Maybe you rock forward once or twice before pushing up. A 72-year-old patient couldn't get out of her sports car without a full strategy — and she hadn't connected that to strength loss at all. That moment of recognition changed everything for her.

— Clinically, the chair rise is one of the strongest predictors of independence and longevity in adults over 60 — and one of the most reversible.

SIGN 03

You Hold Onto Something When You Get Dressed Standing Up

The wall. The dresser. The doorframe. It feels like being careful — and you tell yourself that's smart. But balance should not require a handrail to put on your pants. This quiet compensation is your body signaling that single-leg stability is eroding.

— Clinically, single-leg stance strength is essential for walking, navigating stairs, and recovering from a stumble before it becomes a fall.

SIGN 04

Stairs, Uneven Ground, and Trails Make You Hesitant

You still do them — but you think about them first. You take the elevator when the escalator is right there. You slow way down on gravel or grass. You used to hike without a second thought. Hesitation before movement is your brain's honest assessment of what your body can safely handle.

— Clinically, avoidance behavior around uneven terrain is a reliable early marker of balance system decline — and it responds remarkably well to targeted training.

SIGN 05

You Trail Your Hand Along Walls or Furniture Walking Through the House

Most people don't notice they're doing this. Running fingertips along the kitchen counter, touching the hallway wall as you pass, steadying yourself on the back of a chair. These micro-contacts are your balance system quietly asking for backup — long before a fall ever happens.

— Clinically, this unconscious touch-seeking behavior indicates the vestibular and proprioceptive systems are no longer working at full capacity — but can be retrained.

If you recognized yourself in two or more of these signs, your body is asking for attention — and the good news is this: every one of these patterns is **addressable**. You don't have to lose ground just because you're getting older. Capability can be preserved, rebuilt, and protected well into your 70s and 80s.

Ready to Go Deeper?

You've identified the signs. Now take the next step — either get your full Capability Score with our free assessment, or go straight to the guide built specifically for what you just recognized.