
RISKS OF FALLING - BALANCE STRENGTHENING

Introduction

Every year millions of people fall and many sustain serious injury. Falls and the resulting injuries have become a major health issue for seniors and their families. At Fairbanks Hearing and Balance Center we see many people whose balance systems have been weakened. They may describe themselves as dizzy, off-balance, unsteady, lightheaded, or use other descriptions. Often, some type of medical treatment can improve a person's sensations of imbalance and problems with gait, but patients can help themselves to speed the recovery process.

Causes of Imbalance

The balance system can be affected by many different medical problems, and so it is important to be fully evaluated by your doctor and audiologist. The balance system can gradually decrease its function with age, and the complex brain interconnections that coordinate sensations like hearing, vision, and muscle control may literally slow down. Also, some diseases or injuries can make falling more likely. Eye problems, loss of muscle strength, ear disease, and arthritis are just some of the things that can affect this complex body system.

Regardless of the cause and treatment of one's dizziness, Balance Retraining Exercises can give your balance system extra strength and practice. With a combination of Balance Retraining and the modification of your environment, you can feel better more quickly than someone who simply waits for improvement to occur on its own.

Home Modifications

- Make sure stairways are well lighted and free of obstacles. Use the hand rails.
- Never stand on a chair or use difficult-to-reach shelves.
- Install hand-holds in and near the shower, tub, and toilet.
- Make sure that light switches are conveniently located so you won't have to try to walk in the dark.
- Be careful of throw rugs and slippery floors.

Rehabilitation and Balance Retraining

Everyone's lifestyle is different. Make sure that you check with your doctor before performing any tasks which might put too much stress on your neck, knees, or abdominal muscles. As you get better at performing balance exercises, work with your doctor, audiologist, or physical therapist to plan on ways to increase the difficulty of your program.

Basic Exercises

Perform each of these in turn, resting briefly between.

- **Head Turn:** Turn your head back and forth from right to left, once per second for 10 times. Turn your head as far as it will comfortably go, and look straight in the direction your head is pointing.
- **Nod:** Nod your head up and down and back again, once per second for 10 times. Tip your head as far as it will comfortably go.
- **Head Turn, Eyes Closed:** Perform the head turn as above, eyes closed.



- **Nod, Eyes Closed:** Perform the nod as above, eyes closed.
- **Head Turn with Target:** Hold your finger out in front of you and perform the head turn while keeping your eyes on your finger.
- **Leg Balance and Coordination:** Stand at a sink or firm counter and grip the edge. Holding yourself in control, lift one leg and stand on one leg for 5 seconds. Alternate with the other leg. Repeat 5 times.
- **Leg Balance and Coordination, Eyes Closed:** Perform the above exercise, eyes closed.

Making Progress

When you first start these exercises, they may make you feel dizzy. Perform them in a safe place where you won't fall. If the exercises start to interfere with your daily activities, do them more slowly, but *don't stop*. Your balance system needs the practice to be strengthened.

Increasing the Difficulty

- Once you are able to do a head-turning exercise at full speed with little or no dizziness while sitting down, try it standing up (in a safe place).
- Once you are able to do a head-turning exercise at full speed with almost no dizziness while standing, try walking a few paces while doing it. Turns can be tricky.
- Once you can do these exercises at full speed with almost no dizziness while walking forwards and backwards, your balance system has all the practice it needs, but don't hesitate to return to them if need be.

Some Final Words

Dizziness and imbalance can be among the most frightening sensations we experience, as the body tries to correct the feeling of falling or being out of control. By using these exercises, you can help take control of these negative feelings and place yourself in a position of both physical and emotional balance again. Don't do any exercise which causes physical pain, tingling sensations, or loss of consciousness. Call our office if you have any questions.