

Balance Difficulties As We Age

By: Keith Swensen, Physical Therapist

Having both feet planted on the ground may not be as easy as we age. The body's internal system for collecting information about its position relative to the outside world is made up of a complex sensory system. As we age, degeneration occurs to the sensory receptors. An example includes vision being affected by increase lens density. Another example was shown in a study done by Skinner and his co-workers, they found that there is an age related decline in position sense. This means that an individual may not realize that he/she is not fully lifting his toes off the ground while he/she is walking. When the local sensory system is not acute, balance is left to the vestibular system. The vestibular system is located in the inner ear. The function of this system is to detect head position and movement. When the vestibular system starts to degenerate, elderly individuals are at risk for frequent loss of balance and falls. Diseases of the neuromuscular system can further compound the problem.

People with vestibular lesions can be potentially treated with specific exercises to improve vestibular function or can be taught compensatory techniques. A one pound cuff weight around the ankles can be used to increase the awareness of ones feet and where they are in space. Head movements side to side and up and down help to retrain the vestibular system on movement. It should be noted that one in three elderly clients complain of vertigo. The symptoms of vertigo includes room spinning, light headedness, dizziness, and feeling off balance.

Vertigo results from a disturbance of the semicircular canals in the inner ear or nerve tracts leading to them. It can be very debilitating in which the sufferer does not want to get out of bed for fear of setting it off. Vertigo should be evaluated for the actual cause of the disturbance. The cause could be coming from the brain (central vestibular system) or it could be from the inner ear structures and the eyes (peripheral vestibular system). Once a cause is determined then the proper treatment can be implemented. Physical therapy can be helpful when the insult is to the peripheral vestibular system. The rationale is to stimulate an imbalance in the vestibular system to promote increased tolerance to movement. There are many specific exercises for each different type of insult to the vestibular system. A physical therapist with vestibular and balance retraining is qualified to help design the proper program for each individual. Although aging can make balance a challenge, there are treatments that can help keep ones feet planted to the ground.

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The Community Care Physical Therapy practice is currently accepting new patients, for more information please call 518-783-3110.