

The Importance of Balance

Many people will have noticed a lot of difficulty in getting around due to slippery roads and pavements over the last few weeks, but balance is something which all of us need to consider, especially as we get older. This month's article looks at how and why we balance, and suggests some basic exercises which all of us *should* be able to do...

The body uses three different systems to keep in balance: vision, biofeedback, and the inner ear. The inner ear contains a series of canals which monitor and respond to movements of the head, the visual system responds to your horizon, and the biofeedback system responds to input from sensors in the muscles, joints, and other parts of the body.

It's quite simple to practice balance moves – think about the way that you walk for example: do you walk strongly and in control, or do you 'lurch' from one foot to another? Do you sometimes find yourself off balance and you're not really sure why this has happened? – these things usually result from a basic lack of control which *may* have developed as a result of injury, incorrect posture, weight issues, pregnancy, joint damage, or infections affecting the ears.

Here is a simple set of balance exercises which anyone can try at home (though if you're unsure it's a good idea to do them close to something which will give you support if you need it, such as the back of a sofa).

Eyes open, first one leg and then the other

- Stand on one leg, arms above head, soft knee
- Move first one arm, then the other, down to the side and back up
- Arms in front, move one out to side and back. Repeat for other arm
- Arms in front (horizontal), elbows bent. Rotate trunk left and right
- Take free leg forward, backward, left, right (keep the body as stationary as possible)

When you can successfully complete this sequence, it's time to remove one of the balance systems – the easiest one to take out is vision, so repeat the sequence with the eyes closed. Only do this if you are confident and there is no danger of falling and hurting yourself on pieces of furniture (remember to have something you can hold onto if needs be). Trying to keep good balance stands all of us in good stead throughout our lives, whether we're 9 or 90. Some more information can be found at the following links:

[http://physicaltherapy.about.com/od/balanceexercises/
Exercises to Improve Balance.htm](http://physicaltherapy.about.com/od/balanceexercises/Exercises_to_Improve_Balance.htm)

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/balance-exercises/SM00049>

Finally, and very importantly: if you haven't exercised for a while, or have any medical conditions which might cause problems, check with your Doctor to ensure it's safe to increase your activity levels. Remember, pain is a sign that something is wrong....

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