

Maintaining Our Balance

As people grow older, maintaining balance can become difficult. Nearly 8 million American adults report having a chronic problem with balance and an additional 2.4 million American adults report having a chronic problem with dizziness alone.

Having good balance means being able to control and maintain your body's position, whether you are moving or remaining still. An intact sense of balance helps you

- walk without staggering
- get up from a chair without falling
- climb stairs without tripping.

Good balance is important to help you get around, stay independent, and carry out daily activities.

Many people experience problems with their sense of balance as they get older, disturbances of the inner ear are the main cause. People feel unsteady, as if they were moving, spinning, or floating.

Vertigo, the feeling that you or the things around you are spinning, is also a common symptom.

There are many types of balance disorders and one of the most common is benign paroxysmal positional vertigo, or BPPV. With BPPV, you experience a brief, intense feeling of vertigo that occurs when you change the position of your head. You may also experience BPPV when rolling over to the left or right, upon getting out of bed in the morning, or when looking for an object on a high or low shelf. BPPV is more likely to occur in adults ages 60 and older, but can also occur in younger people.

In BPPV, small calcium stones in the inner ear become displaced, causing a person to feel dizzy. The reason they become displaced is not known, although it may be caused by an inner ear infection, head injury, or aging.

Labyrinthitis is another type of balance disorder. This is an infection or inflammation of the inner ear causing dizziness and loss of balance. The labyrinth is the organ in your inner ear that helps you maintain your balance.

Ménière's disease is a balance disorder that causes a person to experience:

- vertigo
- hearing loss that comes and goes
- tinnitus, which is a ringing or roaring in the ears
- a feeling of fullness in the ear.

It affects adults of any age and the cause is unknown.

Some balance disorders are caused by problems in the inner ear, others may involve another part of the body, such as the brain or the heart. Aging, infections, head injury, certain medicines, or problems with

blood circulation may result in a balance problem. Balance problems can also result from taking certain medications for example, some medicines, such as those that help lower blood pressure, can make a person feel dizzy. Some medicines damage the inner ear and sometimes the damage lasts only as long as you take the drug; other times it is permanent. Check with your doctor if you notice a problem while taking a medication.

Diseases of the circulatory system, such as stroke, can cause dizziness and other balance problems. Smoking, high blood pressure, diabetes, and heart disease increase the risk of stroke. Low blood pressure also can cause dizziness and fainting to occur.

It can be difficult to diagnose balance disorders because patients sometimes find it hard to describe their symptoms to a doctor. Patients may use words such as "dizzy," "woozy," or "lightheaded" to describe what they are feeling. For some people, the feeling can be brief, while for others, it can last a long time, disrupting their daily lives.

If you can answer yes to any of the following questions you should discuss the symptom with your doctor:

- Do I have the feeling of being “unsteady?”
- Does the room seem to spin around me?
- Is there ever a time when you feel as if you are moving when you know you are standing still?
- Do you lose your balance and fall?
- Do you feel as if you are falling?
- Does your vision ever become “blurred?”
- Do you ever feel disoriented lose a sense of time, place or identify?

Sometimes balance disorders can be a sign of other health problems such as those affecting the brain, the heart, or circulation of the blood. They are also one cause of falls and fall-related injuries in older adults. For these reasons, it is important to have a potential balance disorder diagnosed by your physician and treated as soon as possible. Not all issues with balance are due to health problems; sometimes it's just a matter of losing what we are not using. Challenging your balance and increasing strength with simple exercises can go a long way in improving balance and protecting you against falling. You can learn about some of these simple balance and strength exercises at a new falls prevention workshop the Aging & Disability Resource Center is hosting, called “Stepping On”. The workshops will be held at the following locations and dates:

Cumberland Senior Center; Wednesdays, Feb. 24 – Apr. 7 from 9:30 – 11:30 am

Thomas Landing in Rice Lake; Tuesdays, Mar.2 – Apr. 13 from 9:30 – 11:30 am

Cost of the workshop is \$10 and includes the exercise manual. For more information or to register for a Stepping On workshop, please call Trisha Bailkey at **715-537-6225**.