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The Importance Of Balance

Try taking this simple test:

Close your eyes, stand on one leg and see how long you can maintain your balance.
It is surprisingly difficult.

Often we take our balancing skills for granted, and various factors contribute to balance becoming a more difficult task as we get older. The consequences of losing our ability to balance can be significant. Falls are a leading cause of injury and/or hospitalisation, particularly for people over the age of 65.

About one in five older people have a fall in any given twelve-month period. These can range from relatively minor abrasions or bruises to more significant injuries such as fractures. Furthermore, the loss of confidence or subsequent fear and anxiety, which may follow a fall, will often make a person less mobile. Even without injury the fear of a fall can easily encourage older people to curtail their activities just to avoid being put in the situation where a fall may happen.

But what causes poor balance?

Very often one particular cause cannot be identified.

Poor balance is usually a combination of factors. Furthermore this deterioration of balance often happens so slowly that it almost goes unnoticed.

Consequently either consciously or otherwise we may alter our walking pattern. We may take shorter steps to avoid standing on one leg, or shuffle to keep our feet close to the ground – perhaps place out feet wider apart to give us a wider base of support.

Poor posture may result in decreased muscle control and stability that in turn can cause a reduction in flexibility and strength.

Balance and equilibrium reactions are often automatic functions controlled by our brain.

If we stumble to the right we instinctively arch to the left to keep from falling.

These balancing reflexes cannot work efficiently, unless our muscles are strong and our joints are flexible enough to respond. So our balancing ability is directly related to the strength of our legs and the flexibility of our ankles. In this way, strengthening exercises (particularly functional exercises) can help.

A deterioration of balance may result more from ‘non-use’ rather than simply from aging. However, since no single factor is responsible for the loss of balance, improving one factor alone will not improve balance.

Better balance is a combination of improved walking patterns, postural control, co-ordination, reaction time, muscle strength and mobility.