

Balance Problems

Normal balance orientation, or the state of “equilibrium,” is critical to a person’s quality of life. Balance requires the integration of three primary sensory systems: vestibular (inner ear), visual and somatosensory (central nervous). These three sensory systems work collectively to help ensure effective balance. When one or more is disrupted, by methods such as trauma or disease, a balance problem may result.

Vertigo, or dizziness, is the most commonly reported form of a balance problem. As people get older, the prevalence of balance problems is more commonly reported. Some balance disorders also involve the hearing system, while other balance problems do not.¹

Some people are reluctant to admit they have a balance problem. They are embarrassed or believe they may be imagining a problem. If you have reason to believe that you may have a problem with balance, it is far better to address it than to wait and risk a serious accident. According to a news release from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, “Falls among the elderly are common and can be deadly: In 2005, nearly 300,000 Americans suffered hip fractures after a fall, and an average of 24 percent of hip-fracture patients aged 50 and over die in the year following their fracture, according to the National Osteoporosis Foundation.”²

When balance problems impact your life, it is time for action. Contacting your family physician is frequently a good place to begin. Depending upon what your physician determines during the examination, you may be referred for testing, which can range from screenings to more complex diagnostic tests. Because the balance system includes three primary sensory systems, one or more professionals may be involved in the screenings or more complex testing. You may see specialists in internal medicine, neurology, ophthalmology, otology, audiology, or physical medicine, among others. Professionals specializing in the ear and balance systems, and other professional disciplines, are prepared to work cooperatively with your primary care physician to help isolate the balance problem, measure the impact on the balance system and work toward a desired resolution.



SEEK ASSISTANCE: Balance problems can affect your quality of life or cause an injury. Talk to your doctor and get help.

Testing for balance problems may reveal that one or more of the sensory systems is involved. When a sensory system is determined to be adversely impacted causing a balance abnormality, treatment normally is initiated to resolve the problem. Treatment may involve very simple solutions or more complex solutions. In many cases, the balance problem is the result of the vestibular (inner ear) system. When the inner ear system is believed to be causing the balance problem, patients are frequently given specialized care by an audiologist.

One helpful solution for some balance problems involves a specifically designed exercise program. Exercise programs are sometimes used when the problem is diagnosed as benign paroxysmal positional vertigo (BPPV). The program is designed to help the patient learn to compensate for the compromised balance system. Other reasons for a balance problem may involve the inner ear labyrinth, vision, medications, circulatory system, or disease. For these more complex systemic problems causing balance abnormality, specialists that work with these systems frequently use physical therapy, medications and other procedures to help the patient manage the balance problem.

Balance problems are a frequently reported condition, and there is typically an increase in patient complaints as people age. Detecting balance problems may involve screenings and more detailed testing, and subsequent treatment ranges from physical therapy to medications to more complex treatments. Patients who suspect they have a balance problem are encouraged to seek immediate help from their primary care physician rather than risk this problem being responsible for balance related injuries and other related health concerns.

REFERENCES

1. Balance Problems. Mayo Clinic, accessed at www.mayoclinic.org/balance/types.html
2. MIT Grad Student’s Invention Could One Day Prevent Falls For Those With Balance Problems. Accessed at <http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice/2008/i-shoe-0716.html>

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