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360-468-4446
admin@lihhs.org
178 Weeks Road
PO Box 747
Lopez Island WA
98261

www.lihhs.org

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A Good Sense of Balance is Vital

By Gayle Isbell, DC

Balance is vital at any age and is strongly correlated with overall well-being. A good sense of balance, with awareness of where your body is in relation to the things around you, can help you react quickly and prevent injuries and accidents. Do we naturally lose this ability as we age? Not really. We do affect our balance by our lifestyle choices, though. A sedentary lifestyle (lots of sitting), lower body weakness, and/or foot problems will contribute to diminished balance. Because balance can be learned, maintained and improved, what can you do to make your balance better?

Proper balance begins with proper alignment of the skeletal frame, which is supported by the muscles. Proper alignment is obtained with the feet straight and hip-width apart from each other. The ankle-bone, hip bone, shoulder, and ear should be in a straight line when viewed from the side. Sixty percent of your weight should be in the heels; you should be able to wiggle your toes. Now you are starting from a balanced body!

Walking. If you are able to walk, this is absolutely the best exercise. Walking with feet straight and a long stride with arms swinging back is the ideal, but walking of any kind is better than sitting. If walking is not something you regularly do, then start with short walks, and push yourself to add more steps each day.

Single Leg standing or Pelvic Lift. Stand with both legs straight, holding a wall or chair if necessary, push down with your left leg to raise your right leg up. Don't hike the right leg up with your lower back or bend either knee—let the work come from your left hip muscles. Hold for 30 seconds and then switch sides. You can do this exercise while standing in line or working in the kitchen. If this is too difficult, you can stand on a block or book with one leg and try to hold your hips even and parallel to the ground. You will feel that hip and butt muscle start to burn.

Stretch Your Calves. Calf stretches are designed to lengthen and strengthen your stride. Place a rolled up towel or yoga mat in front of you. Place the ball of the right foot on top and drop your heel to the floor. Step your left foot forward, keeping the right heel down and your torso upright. No bent knees! Keep your legs straight. Hold for 30 seconds and then switch legs. Do this a few times a day.

Free Those Tootsies. Most shoes are constrictive and actually make the muscles of the feet atrophy. Take off your shoes and while standing (use support if necessary) spread the toes, wiggle the toes, lift the toes, (together and individually), twirl the ankle both directions, point the feet, and flex the feet.

Don't Peek. Stand with correct stance and close your eyes. To begin with, you will probably need to be near a wall or have a chair close by. You will sway, sometimes a lot, so be careful. Try for 60 seconds and don't give up. Your brain will take a while to learn to send the signals to make the swaying less. Try standing on a single leg, then switch legs.

Monster Walk. Clear a long space and while in correct stance, start walking sideways. Do a pelvic lift on the left leg and when your right leg clears the floor, swing it out to the right side and put your foot down. Now shift the weight slightly to the right leg, do a pelvic lift, and bring your left leg toward your right. Try to keep your upper body still and straight. Take several steps, then reverse.

Advanced Exercise. Try walking on a balance beam, curb, or edge of a step without flapping your wings. If you can't find one, use blue tape on your floor and try to walk a straight line. Also, try walking it heel to toe.

Move, Move, Move. The more you move, the better. Your body will feel better, your brain will be happier, and your balance will improve. Start slowly if you're used to spending a lot of time sitting. Look for creative ways to add more your longevity. It's the increase in general movement throughout your day that will make the difference.

Reading Material. **Dynamic Aging** by Katy Bowmen. (The Lopez Bookshop has them stocked and offers discounts). This is an amazing book for anyone concerned with maintaining or improving your strength and mobility at any age.

Balance is vital at any age, strongly correlated with overall well being.

- Gayle Isbell, DC

Dr. Gayle Isbell has been a chiropractor for 39 years. She is also a Neurofeedback practitioner and a Restorative Exercise Specialist.