

Its All About Balance

by James Bone

Good balance is essential to everything we do. The fact that we stand upright on 2 feet is an amazing thing that we take for granted, because it all seems to happen automatically.

Our brain takes the information from our eyes, our inner ear (called the vestibular apparatus), and the sensory nerves in our muscles and joints (called proprioceptors), processes it in conjunction with the action you are doing, and acts to keep our self balanced and upright, all within microseconds.

GOOD balance is essential to:

- playing sport – think of that golf swing without good balance
- walking/running – especially on uneven ground, on the beach or in the bush
- dancing
- riding a bike
- gardening – bending over to weed
- around home or office – reaching up for something
- working – especially if your work is active

As we get older we tend to lose our balance and this can lead to increased risk of falls – falls can be nasty for older people, causing them to lose their independence, ongoing pain, and may even lead to earlier mortality.

This loss of balance happens for many reasons, but one key factor is that we become slower. Our muscles are made up of various fibres – some can contract very fast, but fatigue quickly, while others contract slower, but can continue to contract for longer. As we get older we tend to lose the faster contracting muscle fibres, so our reactions become slower. Luckily we can do something to reduce this loss of faster muscle fibres – **stay active and do strength exercise.**

Balance can also be affected by:

- Medication – check with your doctor, if your medication could affect your balance
- Poor eyesight – have your eyes checked regularly
- Poor lighting – especially if older or your eyesight is poor
- Poor footwear – see your podiatrist, physio, or good footwear outlet to get advice about this
- Medical problems – it is known that migraines can affect your balance, as can a number of medical conditions – see your doctor about this
- Injury or problem – an injury or problem such as arthritis to your ankle, knee, hip, or back can upset your balance – see your physiotherapist for advice

How good is your balance?

Try this simple Self Test to give you an indication of your balance

CARE – have wall or sturdy bench close by to hold, or an assistant, in case you lose your balance

Single Leg Balance Test

- Rest your hands at your side and lift one leg at a time
- Practice your balance with your eyes open for 5-10 seconds on each leg
- Time yourself on each leg with your eyes open and with your eyes closed
- Stop the clock when a foot is put down; when your arms reach out; when you have to grasp something; or when you begin to hop.
- Compare you results to table norms given next – if below the norms, you may benefit from balance training

Age	Eyes Open (secs)	Eyes Closed (secs)
20-59	29-30	21-28.8
60-69	22.5	10
70-79	14.2	4.3

Improving and maintaining Balance is EASY

CARE – if you have a specific balance problem it may be helpful to see your physiotherapist for assistance. Start easy and build slowly.

- As we said above - **STAY ACTIVE**
- **Exercise Regularly** – research has shown exercise is one of the best things you can do to preserve and improve your balance – this can include:
Walking, bush walking, strength training, dancing, functional training, etc
- PRACTISE **Specific Balance exercises** such as standing on one leg, tight rope walking, wobble board, dynamic movement such as moving lunges OR do an activity, which requires balance such as dancing, or martial arts

CARE - Have a wall or sturdy bench close by for support if your balance is poor.

- Do **strength** training, and exercise which strengthens your deep postural muscles and legs
- Try **Tai Chi** – research has shown that Tai Chi can improve balance for some people
- Keep yourself **FLEXIBLE – yoga** is one the best activities for this and research has shown that even basic yoga practices can help improve balance also (especially for older people)
- Get regular **eyesight and medical checks**
- If using **medications, check** they are not affecting your balance
- Stay healthy – keep **a balanced lifestyle** – get enough rest, manage stress, eat well
- **GROUND your self** – this a concept used a lot in the Eastern Tradition – it means to bring yourself into PRESENT focus and out of your head space. You can do this by bringing your awareness to your lower belly, to the base of your spine, or even better, to the soles of your feet. **Try this** – do one of the balance checks when you are stressed, worried or thinking too much, and then compare it to when you are feeling calm and present focused.

Balance YOGA TIP – when practising a balance practice in yoga, remember to GROUND yourself, UNLOCK your joints and RELAX.... don't fight to stay in balance. Remember the hard dead tree breaks in the wind, while the soft green tree yields to the wind. Be the young sapling...

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