

## KEEPING IT ALL IN BALANCE

Having good balance means being able to maintain your body's position without feeling dizzy or unsteady. Good balance lets you walk without staggering, climb stairs without tripping, and get up from a chair without falling.

As we age, we can develop problems with our balance, leading to falls and injuries. Some of the contributing factors include:

- **Vision problems** can make it difficult to judge distances.
- **Hearing loss** can decrease balance.
- **Gait**, the way we walk, can change with age, and this can make it harder to keep our balance.
- **Loss of muscle strength and joint flexibility** can make it hard to keep our balance.
- **Loss of bone density** makes bones weaker and can lead to more serious injuries like broken bones if we lose our balance and fall.
- **Some medications** cause side effects that affect balance.



### *The Risk of Falling*

The biggest problem with loss of balance is that it increases the risk of falling. And falling can mean big problems. Here are some facts about falling that you might not be aware of:

- Falls are responsible for more than half of all injuries among Canadians age 65 and over.
- Falls are behind 85% of injury-related hospitalizations in people in this age group.
- 40% of falls among seniors result in a hip fracture, and half of those who break a hip never recover full functioning.

### *Protecting Yourself*

There are some things you can do to help prevent falls.

- If you wear glasses or have hearing aids, make sure to wear them all of the time.
- When rising from a chair or bed, get up slowly.
- Wear low-heeled shoes that fit well and provide good support.
- If one of your legs is stronger than the other, step into the tub or shower with your weaker leg first, but step out with your stronger leg first.
- If you are feeling weak or dizzy, have someone help you get up, walk, or bathe.
- If you use a cane or walker, be especially careful on wet or smooth surfaces, because these devices can slip out from under you.
- Ask your consultant pharmacist if any of the medicines you take could affect your balance.



## Taking Medicine

Modern medicines have contributed significantly to our longer lifespans and the improved quality of life as we age, but all medications (even nonprescription drugs, herbal supplements, and natural health products) have side effects. Unfortunately, some side effects can affect balance. Some commonly used medications that can affect balance include:

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- anti-anxiety medicines
  - antidepressants
  - antihistamines (used to treat allergies)
  - heart medicines, including blood pressure drugs
  - pain relievers
  - sedatives
  - sleep aids

Sometimes the problem isn't a single drug, but an interaction between two or more drugs. That's why it is so important to make sure your consultant pharmacist knows about all of the health products you take. Pharmacists have the education and information needed to assess all of your medicines and how they affect one another. They can advise you on how to get the most benefit from your medicines, and they can tell you which nonprescription drugs and other health products can interact with your prescription medicines.

Your pharmacist can also review all of the prescription medications you take to make sure they don't interact with each other. This is particularly important if you see more than one doctor (for example, a family doctor and one or more specialists) who may be prescribing medications for you.

## Exercises that Improve Balance

It might seem odd to talk about exercises helping you maintain balance, but improving the strength of the muscles in your abdomen and legs can increase your stability.



If you suspect that you might have a more serious problem (such as an ear infection or chronic dizziness), you should see your doctor, but as long as your balance problems are due to the normal changes associated with aging (generally related to inactivity and not using your muscles and joints), exercising may help. Here are a few exercises you can try:

- **Single leg stand:** Holding onto a chair for support, bend one leg at the knee and raise it off the floor. Stand on your other leg with your body straight and aligned above your ankle. Alternate standing on one leg and then the other. Start by standing on each leg for just a few seconds and try to work up to a minute.
- **Knee marching:** Stand with your arms at your sides and your feet shoulder-width apart. Raise one knee up as high as you can lift it comfortably. Lower that knee and raise the other one. Then do it again. Start slowly and try to work up to being able to do it 20 times.
- **Balanced walk:** Begin with your feet together and your hands at your sides. Step forward with your right foot. Try to maintain this position for ten seconds; then step back so your feet are together again. Repeat with your left foot. Start with just a few steps and build your stamina slowly.