**Are you off Balance?**

Maintaining a sense of balance is a true concern for many individuals, as it should be. Balance affects all of us. Most of us are not aware of the deterioration our balance capabilities, until we perform an activity that requires it; like skiing or skating, or we find ourselves in a situation that requires it; like a slip on the ice.  
  
The average person’s sense of balance begins to decline around the age of 25. Our sense of balance is primarily determined by three elements working together; vision, the inner ear and proprioceptors. Have you ever tried to stand on one foot with your eyes closed? Try it and you’ll discover how important vision is to maintain an upright position.  
  
If you know anything about vertigo and balance, you know that the inner ear plays a pertinent part in balance. In fact, I would guess that if you’ve ever had a vertigo issue there’s a good chance it started with some kind of inner ear problem.  
  
Proprioceptors are essentially sensory receptors within the body that recognize movements and the “where-abouts” of the body in space. When balance is working the best, all three of these components are probably in sync.  
  
There are many things that affect your balance. We all have good balance days and bad balance days. Things that affect balance are; sleep patterns, hydration levels, fatigue, stress, medications, allergies, fitness levels and even symptoms associated with the common cold.  
  
The biggest question I get about balance is “how to improve it.” Fortunately, there are a multiple things you can do. The first is to light a fire under your feet. O.K. not a real fire, we just want to stimulate those nerve endings that we’ve protected for so long by wearing shoes. It’s as simple as walking around your house barefoot. Yes, you want to make your feet aware of new feelings, new sensations and new movements and allowing the bottoms of your feet to touch the floor will do this. Walk across different surfaces like; hardwood, tile, decking, carpet, outside through the grass, indoor/outdoor carpet, door mats, etc. The sensations of these different floorings will stimulate awareness of where your feet are. Not all stimulations will be pleasant but remember that you don’t need to make yourself completely uncomfortable doing this exercise. Just stimulate those proprioceptors on the bottom of your feet for a short amount of time every day. Your brain will become more aware of where your feet are by waking up these nerve endings and your balance will improve overall. Being barefoot is a great thing, given it doesn’t create any other biomechanical issues with your body.  
  
Another way to improve your balance is through basic exercises that focus on strengthening the muscles and joints of your body, particularly the joints of your lower body. To strengthen your feet, lay a small towel on the floor in front of your feet and with your toes, try to pull that towel towards you in little scoop-like motions.  
  
Calf raises (extension of the ankle) and pulling your toes toward you (flexion of the ankle) will also strengthen your feet along with your ankles, the muscles of your shins and calves.  
  
Leg extensions (for the quads) and leg curls (for the hamstrings) strengthen the muscles of the upper leg which, along with the lower leg muscles, keep the knee joint strong.  
  
The most important exercises for balance are those exercises centered around the hips and movement. So much balance control comes from hip strength, flexibility and the ability to shift body weight according to body position. You can strengthen the hip joint by doing movements like standing, straight-leg (or bent-knee) lifts to the front, side and back while moving your legs through those three positions. Also adding movements that require you to shift your body weight side to side and forward and back will help strengthen your hips for times when you find yourself off balance.  
  
It’s simple to incorporate balance exercises into workout and into any lifestyle. So, don’t be surprised to find yourself more off balance as you age and understand that you have control and can fix it!