

Maintaining Balance As We Age

As we age, the ability to maintain balance becomes more difficult. Many factors influence good balance, some of them are biological and some we are able to influence and are able to improve. Balance and stability are important factors for aging adults to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Loss of balance is the primary factor in falls, which often results in serious injuries.

Good balance is dependent on sensory input from the eyes, the correct functioning of the balance system in the inner ear, posture and center of gravity and our ability to sense the position and movement in our feet, legs and arms. Vision affects the balance system, as the eyes send messages to the brain telling us where objects are in space.

Aging adults are affected by a loss of muscle mass and strength. This is associated with an increased risk of falls and hip fractures. It also has a great affect on maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Weakness in the ankle musculature may cause difficulty in recovering lost balance more quickly. Strong quadriceps muscles are necessary for good balance and walking. Evidence shows the strength and aerobic training can lead to a reduction in falls.

Loss of flexibility occurs with age. This may lead to difficulty climbing stairs, transferring from sit to stand and or getting out of bed without difficulty. Much of the loss of flexibility is due to inactivity. Flexibility exercises,

stretches, gentle yoga will help improve flexibility of major muscle groups and therefore improve ones ability to complete everyday activities.

Postural changes develop as people age but not because they age. Rounded shoulders, forward head postures, increased thoracic curves in the spine are common postural changes. These changes affect the center of gravity in the body moving it forward. With changes in the center of gravity, older adults are more prone to loss of balance and an increased risk of falls.

Medications also contribute to the deterioration of the balance system. Research has shown that adding new medications in the previous two weeks increases the risk for falling. There are many ways we can adapt to the changes in our bodies as we age. Different forms of exercise, such as strengthening exercises, flexibility and stretches, postural exercise, yoga, tai chi, and aerobic exercise, for example, walking, will all contribute to decreasing the risk of falls and improving balance.

Physical Therapy is an excellent means towards establishing a healthy and safe program of exercise to meet your goals. Physical Therapy at Briarcliff & Jefferson Valley offer many programs to improve flexibility, strength and balance. Our physical therapists can design a program specific to your needs. If you have questions, please call 914-255-8807.