



Why Your Balance is Important: Increased Risk of Falling



Audiology
ASSOCIATES, INC. 
Ear, Tinnitus, Brain & Balance Centers of Alaska



INTRODUCTORY LETTER FROM DR. MCCARTY

“Hearing Loss increases the risk of falling 200-300%!”

As we age our risk of losing our balance increases dramatically. Perhaps the familiar saying about how ‘the bigger they are, the harder they fall’ should be changed to ‘the older we are, the harder we fall’. Nearly every year, 3,000,000 older adults are brought into emergency rooms for fall-related injuries.



Dr. Thomas A. McCarty, Au.D.
Doctor of Audiology Founder

There is not one reason that older adults fall more often, rather a complicated and intricate web of changes in cardiovascular function, nutritional deficiencies, medication interactions, vision problems and hearing loss that contribute to this increased risk. Although most people don’t instantly think of ‘hearing loss’ as being a leading cause of falls, experts across a range of health care professions agree that the lack of this important sense can deprive the brain of the information it needs to best understand its surroundings, leaving you in serious danger. In the past decade, the fall death rate (i.e. the death of an older adult directly attributed to a fall) has risen over 30%, and in the next decade it is estimated that there will be approximately seven ‘fall deaths’ every single hour.

A fall can threaten one’s safety and independence and generate enormous economic and personal expenses. It is estimated that a fall can cost a family, on average, nearly \$30,000 per incident. And, unfortunately, those who fall nearly double their risk of falling again. If you or somebody you love has had a traumatic fall, you are keenly aware of the overall health decline and increase in health care needs that are required after the incident.

While there are few certainties in life – aging is one of them and along with aging comes our near certain fate of experiencing hearing loss, tinnitus and associated cognitive deficits. Nearly 50,000,000 Americans have hearing loss to some degree, and the chances of experiencing this silent disorder increase dramatically with age, impacting:

- nearly half of people between the age of 60-70 years young
- nearly 2/3 of people between 70-80 years young
- and likely as many as 80% of people over the age of 80 years young

Other common ear-related disorders can impact balance including Meniere’s Syndrome and BPPV (Benign Paroxysmal Positional Vertigo).

All Excellence In Audiology member-clinics believe that “Hearing Care Is Health Care”. We understand the benefits of treating hearing loss on overall quality of life, improvements in cognitive function, reducing the risk of dementia, and reducing the risk of life-altering falls.

Sincerely,

Dr. Thomas A. McCarty

Dr. Thomas A. McCarty, Au.D.
Founder



WHY YOUR BALANCE IS IMPORTANT: INCREASED RISK OF FALLING

Did you know that each year, millions of older people—mostly those 65 and older—experience a fall? Did you know that your balance system plays a huge part in helping you to stand, walk, and move around your environment without falling? Balance disorders are at the top of the list of conditions affecting older individuals, causing uncomfortable symptoms such as dizziness, nausea, and increased risk of falling.

Did you know that falling once actually doubles your chances of falling again? Fall risk is the leading cause of injury-related deaths and hospital admissions in older adults. In addition, given the decrease in bone density in older adults, **falls account for nearly 90% of hip fractures. That's right--not only are older adults**

more prone to falling, but they are also more susceptible to fall-related injuries such as a broken hip or head trauma.

Understanding why the balance system is important and leaves you at an increased risk can help people to take the proper steps to prevent taking that next misstep that leads to a fall.

There are several symptoms that may indicate a balance disorder, including:

- Confusion or Disorientation
- Dizziness or Vertigo
- Blurred Vision
- Falling (or feeling like you are going to fall)
- Lightheadedness
- Faintness
- Floating Sensation
- Staggering When Walking



About 15% of American Adults (33 million) have a balance or dizziness problem.

- U.S. Department of Health & Human Services



Several factors contribute to the cause of balance disorders. Some include ear infections, head injuries, certain medications, low blood pressure and many other things that could affect the brain or inner ear. Unfortunately, many of these balance disorders can begin suddenly and the cause may not be obvious. As you get older, your risk of balance issues increases. Some of the most common balance disorders are listed below.

Meniere's Disease. This is associated with a change in fluid volume in the inner ear causing vertigo, hearing loss, tinnitus (ringing, whooshing, or buzzing sounds in the ear), or a feeling of fullness in your ear.

Benign Paroxysmal Positional Vertigo (BPPV). This is the result of an intense period of vertigo

which has been prompted by a change of position of the head. When suffering from BPPV, you may feel as though you start spinning when you bend down, tilt your head, or roll over in bed. BPPV can result from a head injury or just simply occur with age.

Mal de Debarquement Syndrome (MDDs). This is when you have a feeling of continuous bobbing, swaying, or rocking and happens typically after you have been on a boat such as a cruise or ocean fishing. The symptoms of MDDs will generally dissipate after a few hours or even days, but severe cases can last months or even years.

Labyrinthitis. This is an inflammation or infection of the inner ear which can result in dizziness and loss of balance. Labyrinthitis is



often linked with the flu or an upper respiratory infection.

Perilymph Fistula. This can result in a leakage of inner ear fluid into the middle ear. Symptoms include dizziness, nausea, and unsteadiness. Perilymph Fistula can occur after scuba diving, excessive physical exertion, a head injury, chronic ear infections, or ear surgery.

Vestibular Neuronitis. Typically caused by a virus, Vestibular Neuronitis is an inflammation of the vestibular nerve and results in a feeling of vertigo.

FALLS, BALANCE, AND HEARING DISORDERS

The inner ear is responsible for hearing and balance; thus, there are many ways to stay on top of your hearing health and prevent hearing disorders, balance disorders, and falls.

Improving Balance

Every 13 seconds, an older adult is rushed to an emergency room because of a fall. So many older adults are falling that it is the leading cause of accidental death in this age group (> 65 years young). However, despite the fact that the rate of fatal falls is at an all-time high, and continues to increase, most — if not all — falls are preventable. Taking simple steps to avoid falling can help keep you from the emotional, physical and financial burden of caring for yourself, or a loved one, who has fallen.

It makes sense that if balance, hearing, and fall issues are addressed as early as possible, one can significantly decrease their risk of a disastrous fall.

Treat your hearing loss. Research has unequivocally found that one's risk of falling increases to over 300% with hearing loss.

Even a 'mild' hearing loss can increase this risk, further signaling that a mild hearing loss is a major problem. Fortunately, the medical treatment of hearing loss is designed to provide the clarity, auditory awareness and cognitive stimulation required to reduce the risk of falls. New treatment options are simple, affordable and provide significant benefits to physical and cognitive health. Some technology options exist that can even detect a fall and alert loved ones.

Exercise. Regular exercise can help prevent falls by making muscles stronger and more flexible, improve your balance and increase how long you can stay active for. *Any exercise regimen should be approved by a primary care physician.* Some sample exercises to improve balance include:

- **Yoga** – beginning to mid-level to expert yoga classes will help to improve flexibility, your ability to hold your body steady, and perform disciplined movements.
- **Tai Chi** – consists of a series of fluid, choreographed movements and poses. Tai Chi will increase your balance, build muscle strength, and stamina.
- **Pilates** – builds strong core muscles and flexibility, good posture, and excellent balance.
- **Strength Training** – builds balance and good muscle strength. Use free weights, machines, or bands. You can add in walking, cycling, and stair climbing.
- **Stretching and Core Exercises** – improves balance and posture.
- **Gentle Target Balance Exercises for Older Adults** – heel raises, back bends, stand up/sit downs, side squats, lunges, leg lifts, tree poses, single-leg stances, and much more. Will help to regain balance over time.

About **15% of American Adults** have a balance or dizziness problem.))



If rates continue to rise, we can anticipate

7 FALL DEATHS
EVERY HOUR
BY 2030

If you experience any pain, dizziness, or problems breathing during or after any exercise, stop and seek medical attention. Start at a slow pace: 5-10 minutes a day.

Evaluate medications. If you are taking medications, be sure to review with your pharmacist potential side effects, including balance issues and increased risk of falling. Note that prescription, over-the-counter medications and supplements can cause dizziness and drowsiness, especially when taken together. Medications can also lower blood pressure, thus increasing rates of orthostatic hypotension.

Check your vision. According to the Mayo Clinic, older adults should have their eyes examined once per year. An eye exam helps detect eye problems at their earliest stage — *when they're most treatable*. Your balance organ and visual system are intimately tied together, and a deficit in either can impact your balance. In addition, individuals with distance vision problems are 2-3 times more likely to develop cognitive impairment (compared to those with normal vision). If you are prescribed glasses - wear them!

Note - when receiving a new prescription, allow time for your brain to adapt, as this adaptation period may leave people more prone to a misstep and a fall.

Make your home safer. The data is clear; most people (~78%) fall at home! Nearly 55% of falls occur inside the home and nearly 23% happen outside or near the home. There are many no-cost and low-cost changes that one can make to their home to reduce the fall hazard. For example:

- ✓ Remove clutter from stairs and walkways.
- ✓ Rearrange furniture and cords so they are not a trip hazard.
- ✓ Remove throw rugs (yes, even the pretty ones!).
- ✓ Make sure you place your phone near the floor in case you fall and cannot stand to reach it.
- ✓ Use non-slip rubber bathmats.
- ✓ Wear non-slip slippers/socks.
- ✓ Install stairwell lighting and grab bars in the bathroom.
- ✓ When appropriate, invest in a home emergency response system with a fall detection device to alert emergency responders when you fall.

Often, patients are referred for balance therapy to reduce the risk of falls. There is a lot of

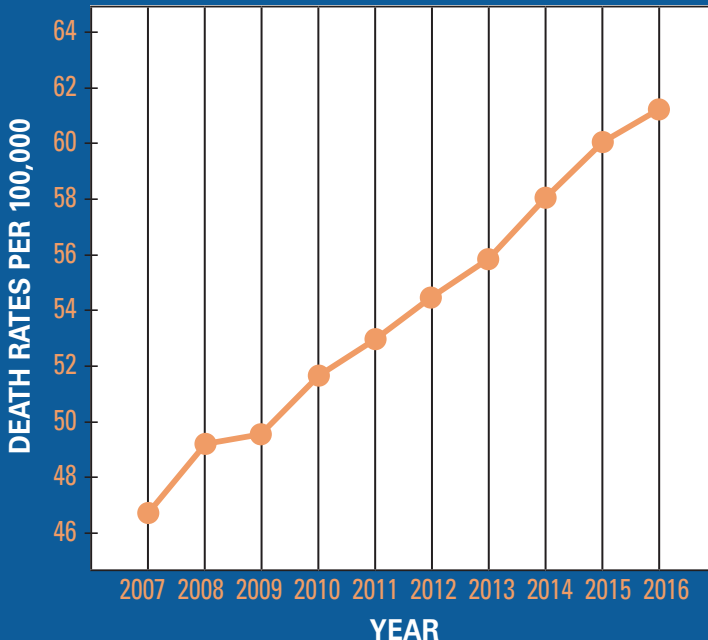
research that has shown us that dizziness and falls can be prevented through proper rehabilitation plans tailored to your specific needs.


Sadly, it is estimated that 25% of adults aged 65 and 50% of adults age 75+ may have disabling hearing losses, 4 out of 5 people that would benefit from amplification do not wear proper amplification, and the vast majority of them also experience tinnitus. These are just some of the devastating symptoms of inner ear damage that may coincide with balance disorders. As our body changes with age, it is common to see a decline in the inner ear. This puts us at a high risk of a fall if left untreated.

Early intervention is the main goal. Aging is inevitable but decline is optional.

Although balance issues and falling can have a devastating effect on one's life, falls are considered preventable. For those living with risk factors, it is important to reduce the risk by taking some of the simple steps outlined in this report. Your Excellence In Audiology certified hearing health care provider can help you get on the 'straight and narrow' by addressing your concerns and treating your hearing loss. In addition, they can help to recommend appropriate health care services to lower your risk of balance issues and falling.

Fall Death Rates in the U.S. **INCREASED 30%** from 2007 to 2016 for older adults.





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ASSOCIATES, INC.

Ear, Tinnitus, Brain & Balance Centers of Alaska

(907) 917-3304

3500 LaTouche St., Suite 310

Anchorage, Alaska 99508

www.EarDocAK.com