

## Losing your balance... What is the best treatment?

Balance problems can occur for many reasons. It can be a result of a disease process such as Parkinson's disease or Multiple Sclerosis, due to weakness or arthritis in the knee, ankle or hip, from unknown causes or most commonly a result of the aging process. When we get to 65 we start losing muscle strength at a rate of up to two percent per year. This slow loss of muscle mass reduces your strength along with your balance. With age we also become more sedentary causing loss of strength and endurance. One in four people over age 65 fall each year and this figure rises to 50% for people living in long-term care facilities and one in ten of these falls results in a fracture. A fracture is one of the leading causes of admission to a nursing home or assistive living. Older adults particularly those with osteopenia or osteoporosis should be particularly concerned as they are at higher risk for a fracture. The good news is that balance is a skill that can be relearned! So what is the treatment for a balance problem? The answer is Physical Therapy and Tai Chi (tie-chee).

A Physical Therapist would perform a medical screening and determine what is impairing your balance and then design a program specifically for you. For example, if it is due to an inner ear condition (i.e. Vertigo) the therapist would use vestibular rehabilitation in your treatment. If weakness was a contributing factor they would use strengthening and endurance exercises in your session. Or for Parkinson's disease the therapist would focus on posture and different gait and balance training specific for that disease. Most Physical Therapists incorporate Tai Chi in their treatment for all balance problems as this ancient art has proven to be very effective in retraining balance.

Tai Chi is often described as "meditation in motion," it is derived from the martial arts, and involves a gentle exercise program composed of slow, deliberate dance-like movements, meditation, mental imagery and deep breathing. The movements use the whole body and are performed slowly, with concentration on breathing and inner stillness.

Research has found that Tai Chi can significantly improve a person's balance with as little as 8 weeks showing improvement in balance and a reduction in the risk of a fall. Tai Chi can also increase leg and arm strength, promote postural stability, increase flexibility, help with arthritis pain, aid in the recovery of injuries, reduce blood pressure, lower stress hormones, enhance respiratory and immune function and promotes emotional well-being and relaxation. Other exercises dissipate your energy, while Tai Chi accumulates it, leaving you feeling refreshed when you finish.

Tai Chi is performed in a class at a martial arts center or at a fitness center. Some people may require a more one-on-one approach. Your Physical Therapist can help you choose the best approach for you.