

Balance even more important as we age

May 20 2014, by Evie Polsley

Trips and falls can happen at all stages of life, but as we start to age they can become more numerous. Aging can magnify the impact of risk factors associated with falls and also brings up new and often less obvious factors that affect balance and stability. The causes of balance issues could come from a number of different sources, many that don't have a seemingly direct connection to balance or falls.

"Maintaining good balance becomes even more important as our joints and bones begin to weaken, making the impact of a trip or fall even more devastating," said Jason Rice, MD, [primary care](#) internist at Loyola University Health System.

According to Rice, there are some surprising reasons a person may have trouble with balance or experience more falls.

Blood Pressure Medication

There are a variety of ways medications work to control a patient's blood pressure. This can lead to side effects such as dizziness and lightheadedness, especially when changing positions. The same mechanism that allows our body to quickly adjust our blood flow after moving to a standing position from a seated or flat position can lead to a change in blood pressure, and several medications actively work to hinder this mechanism, which can lead to unsteadiness or falls when changing positions.

"If you are taking [blood pressure medication](#), there may be a few

moments of unsteadiness when you get up because the medicine blocks a mechanism that can cause a brief change in blood pressure. This can be a fall risk," Rice said. "It's important to always stand up slowly and get your bearings before walking. Also, staying hydrated helps to prevent drops in blood pressure."

Blood Vessel Changes

Over time the elasticity of [blood vessels](#) starts to decline and this can affect blood flow. Similar to [blood pressure](#) medication, this can cause people to become dizzy or lightheaded when changing positions, which can lead to falls.

"Without the squeezing of the blood vessels, [blood flow](#) does not return to the heart from distant parts of the body as effectively, especially from the legs. This poses a problem for people when they are changing positions and fighting gravity. Make sure to stand up slowly and hold on to a stable surface before walking," Rice said.

Low Blood Sugar

Low blood sugar can cause dizziness, falls and even loss of consciousness. This is especially true for diabetics. If you are taking medication to lower your blood sugar, make sure you take it with an adequate meal so your sugar doesn't drop too low.

"It's always important for diabetics to check their [blood sugar level](#), but especially if they have unusual symptoms. Low [blood sugar](#) level can be treated immediately with fruit juice, but this should be discussed with a physician to ensure there isn't a problem that needs to be addressed," Rice said.

Declining Vision

Visual clues are an extremely important part of balance. As we age our eyesight declines and this can lead to issues with balance. Regular visits to your [primary care physician](#), which includes a vision assessment, is the best way to avoid this problem.

"In all of these cases, taking your time, being aware of your surroundings and assessing your stability before walking are key to preventing falls," Rice said.

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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