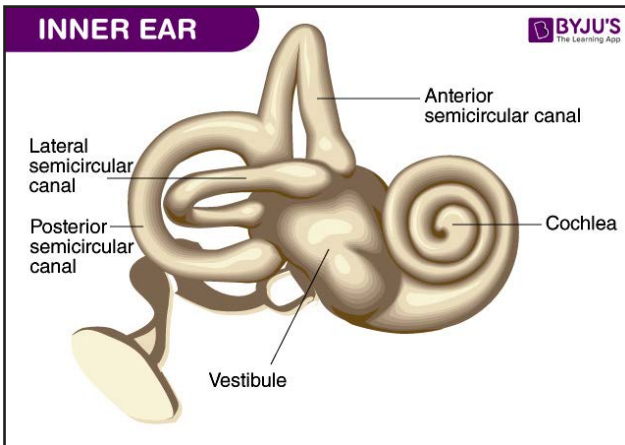
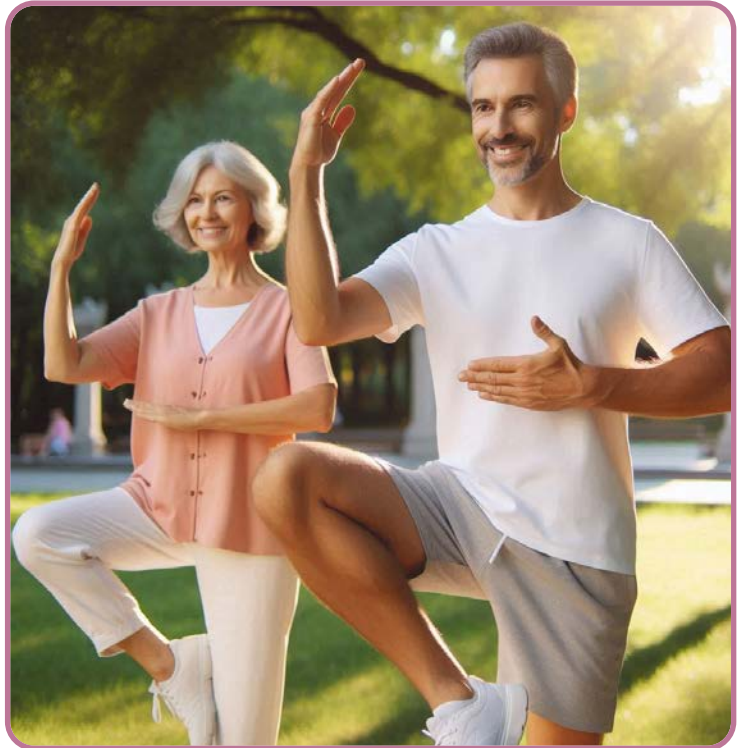


## BALANCE!

I have daily appreciation and gratitude for my vision and hearing, as I have mentioned in previous articles. I certainly would not like to lose either of them. Another sense I admire on a daily basis is my sense of balance.

Balance was not one of the five special senses originally mentioned by Aristotle in the 3rd Century, BC, and yet, I feel that it belongs in the same category. Balance relies entirely on continuous sensors communicating to the brain and spinal cord with the same intricacies as the other senses. It takes similar proportion of brain space as the other senses. The neuromuscular coordination for balance requires extremely accurate coordination, with lightning speed. The main center of coordination in the brain is the **Sensory-Motor Cortex**.



A crucial sensory area for balance is located in the inner ear—the **semicircular canals**. These curved tubes are oriented in all 3 dimensions. Fluid movements in the canals excite nerve endings that detect up and down, side to side, and rotational head movements, in a split second. In the next split second, the brain receives and processes these signals, and directs our musculoskeletal system to adjust to staying safely upright. Visual stimuli are also processed, coordinated and stabilized.

Balance is our relationship with movement and gravity. Human balance is very special because we are two-legged. When moving, we contact the earth or floor with one leg at a time. There is no room for error. Our nervous system protects us with each and every step.

Like the other senses, balance can be taken for granted. Indeed, we don't have to think about it, or "do the math." In the big picture, it is a gift of heredity, from our parents and ancestors, and the Tree of Life: the whole history of DNA successes.

We are capable of doing things more complex than walking, like dancing, skiing, surfing, and any sport. We might consider our daily movements routine, but our brain and nervous system are doing the work of biologic supercomputers! Imagine trying to program a robot to do our daily movements. With the summer Olympics around the corner, we will get to see shining examples of balance.

Particularly in the elderly, balance difficulties can occur, and the consequences of falls can be severe. How can we protect and improve our balance at any age? Here are some basic pro-balance exercises—ideally, at first, do these near a wall or doorway:

1. Stand on one leg for 5–10 seconds, then shift to the other, for 5–10 seconds, and continue for 2 minutes. For variation, put the raised leg 12 inches forward, or backward.

2. Do heel-toe walking for 10-15 steps, turn, and repeat. Keep the gaze on something straight ahead.

3. Try Walking Meditation, a Buddhist practice: Use very slow, short steps for any distance or time, and turn around as necessary. Again, the gaze is straight ahead. Breathing can be coordinated with the steps.

4. Tai Chi and Yoga offer excellent balance training.

In conclusion, balance is a sense on equal par with vision, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. It is worthy of our daily gratitude. It is a wonder of Nature. It is important in survival and all moving activities. Balance exercises can be very useful, including Walking Meditation, Yoga and Tai Chi. ■

— *Namaste!*

Dr. Shapiro is a career clinic physician who has utilized relaxation techniques with many of his patients. His YouTube channel is:



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