

Press Release

For Immediate Release

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**AGING U.S. POPULATION HIGHLIGHTS NEED FOR GREATER
AWARENESS AND RESEARCH OF BALANCE DISORDERS**

**Approximately 9 Percent of Americans 65 and Older
Experience Balance Problems**

**The Vestibular Disorders Association (VEDA) Kicks Off
11th Annual Balance Awareness Week, September 14-20, 2008**

PORTLAND, Ore. – August 9, 2008 – With an aging U.S. population living longer, health issues related to the body’s balance system will become increasingly common. Nearly 9 percent of Americans 65 and over report having problems with balance.¹ The Vestibular Disorders Association (VEDA), with its upcoming twelfth annual Balance Awareness Week (September 14–20), hopes to raise awareness about the importance of balance and the growing need for more research.

“Balance is said to be the sixth sense. People take their balance system for granted until it becomes impaired,” said Lisa Haven, PhD, executive director of VEDA. “The risk of falling is two to three times greater in people with chronic imbalance or dizziness.² With an estimated 78 million baby boomers living longer and remaining active, the demand for services to help people cope with a challenged balance system is increasing.”

The vestibular (balance) system is the body’s “navigator.” Signals from the inner-ear balance organs are coordinated with cues from vision and proprioceptors (pressure sensors in the feet and elsewhere) to tell a person where he or she is in space. The vestibular system provides the brain with the information necessary to control eye movements, posture, and gait.

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As the vestibular system ages, symptoms of dizziness, vertigo, and/or unsteadiness may occur, which can contribute to falls and heighten the impact of other effects of aging. Vestibular disorders can also result at any age from inner ear disease or injury, including from the use of certain intravenous antibiotics.

Symptoms of vestibular disorders may also include nausea, visual disturbances, concentration and memory trouble, hearing loss, tinnitus, fatigue, and headache. A balance problem can be a gateway condition to more serious physical and psychological problems resulting from fall-related injuries: hip and joint replacement, broken bones, ligament damage, depression, anxiety, and social isolation.

With balance-related falls accounting for more than one-half of accidental deaths in the elderly,³ scientists around the United States are working not only on research to better understand and treat inner ear problems, but also on innovative technologies to help a person sense motion correctly and thus improve balance function. For example, a balance prosthesis under development at the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary consists of a vest with tiny motion sensors that vibrate against the skin when a dizzy person wearing the vest begins to lean. Another sensory-substitution device, under development at the University of Wisconsin Medical School, helps the brain recognize balance cues by re-routing information about spatial coordinates through a pattern of touch sensations delivered to microelectrodes placed on the tongue. A different, more invasive approach is a surgical vestibular implant that electrically stimulates the balance nerve.

“Such new technologies show promise for helping people with balance disorders,” said Ms. Haven. “But more research and public awareness are needed.”

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For Balance Awareness Week 2008, VEDA invites volunteers across the U.S. and world to participate by promoting activities such as community-education forums on balance disorders, offering balance screenings, acknowledging physicians and other healthcare providers for their dedicated work, and posting information available from VEDA about balance disorders.

About VEDA

The Vestibular Disorders Association is dedicated to serving people with vestibular disorders by providing access to information, offering a support network, and elevating awareness of the challenges associated with these disorders. Balance Awareness Week was created to improve public understanding of balance disorders and their impact on the lives of affected individuals of all ages. For more information about inner ear balance disorders and the services that VEDA offers, visit www.vestibular.org or call 800-837-8428.

¹National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders. *Balance, Dizziness, and You*. National Institutes of Health Publication No. 00-4374 (G). June 2002. www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/balance/baldizz.asp, accessed 8/18/06.

² Ko CW, Hoffman HJ, Sklare DA. *Chronic Imbalance or Dizziness and Falling: Results from the 1994 Disability Supplement to the National Health Interview Survey and the Second Supplement on Aging Study*. Twenty-ninth MidWinter Meeting of the Association for Research in Otolaryngology (ARO); National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD). Feb. 2006.

³National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, National Institutes of Health. *A Report of the Task Force on the National Strategic Research Plan*. Bethesda, Maryland, April 1989, p. 74.

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