

Effects of age vestibular and visual systems on the soleus H-reflex

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ABSTRACT

The vestibular system, visual and proprioceptive pathways provide information about control of posture, movement and balance. Loss of postural control directly leads to a greater incidence of falling in the elderly population causing serious health problems. One important neuromuscular mechanism instrumental in the control of posture and balance is the reflex system. However, the age-related changes of vestibular and visual systems and their relationship with the reflex system are not clear. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of age, the vestibular and the visual systems on the modulation pattern of the soleus H reflex. Seventeen neurologically healthy volunteers were categorized by age in two groups: young ($n = 8$, mean age = 22.1 ± 5.0 yr.) and elderly ($n = 9$, mean age = 59.3 ± 12.8 yr.). Maximal soleus H-reflex (H-max) and motor response (M-max) amplitudes were determined prior to testing at each condition while subjects were lying supine on a tilt table for standardization. Stimulation intensity was set to evoke a 5-10% M-wave on each trial. Participants received 5 test H-reflex stimuli in two conditions, static 60° and dynamic 60° on a tilt table. Both tilt conditions were performed with vision and no vision. A 3-way repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) 2 (groups: young/old) x 2 (condition: static/dynamic) x 2 (vision: vision/no vision) was used to assess changes in H-reflexes. All data were expressed relative to the H-reflex amplitude at 0° static on the tilt table. The results showed a significant 3-way interaction ($p = .038$). The old group showed greater H-reflex amplitude in the no vision condition at static 60° (vision:0.97; no vision:1.23) whereas in the young group less modulation was demonstrated in the same condition (vision:1.15; no vision:1.12). These results suggest in young subjects the vestibular system produced a suppression of the H-reflex with or without visual input; however, in the old group vision was necessary for this suppression. The interaction between the visual and vestibular systems as we age needs to be further explored.

Keywords: Balance; Elderly; Electromyography; Motor response; H-reflex suppression.

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INTRODUCTION

Normal aging induces degeneration of numerous structures in the musculoskeletal and nervous system. These structural changes in turn affect functionality of the different systems. Postural stability is maintained by the integration of somatosensory, visual and vestibular inputs to the central nervous system, followed by outputs to the musculoskeletal system. Unfortunately, all components deteriorate with advancing age (Iwasaki & Yamasoba, 2015). According to Agrawal et al. (2009), the odds of a balance dysfunction increase with age; nearly 85% of individuals aged 80 years and older have functional evidence of balance dysfunction.

Information from the vestibular system and their central pathways is integrated with the visual and proprioceptive systems to obtain gaze stabilization and postural stability via the vestibuloocular and vestibulospinal reflexes, respectively. It is evident that differences in postural control emerge with age (Vanspauwen, 2018). Loss of postural control directly leads to a greater incidence of falling in the elderly population causing serious health problems. Numerous studies have suggested an association between age and falling in the elderly (Schrager, Kelly, Price, Ferrucci, & Shumway-Cook, 2008; Sherrington et al., 2008; Studenski et al., 2011).

One important neuromuscular mechanism instrumental in the control of posture and balance is the reflex system. The postural system consists of several sensory systems including the somatosensory, visual and vestibular. The vestibular system, visual and proprioceptive pathways provide information about the control of posture, movement, and balance. The vestibular system is a reflex system that contributes to body equilibrium by adjusting the activity of the postural muscles and also by providing information to supraspinal centres about head position, motion and spatial orientation (Dizio & Lackner, 1986; Keshner, Allum, & Pfaltz, 1987).

Baloh et al. (2003) (Baloh, Ying, & Jacobson, 2003) showed age-related decreases in vestibular, visual and somatosensation in normal older people. Teasdale et al. (1991) (Teasdale, Stelmach, & Breunig, 1991) have demonstrated that alteration in any two of the three sensory inputs (visual, vestibular and somatosensory) had a significantly greater effect on older subjects than younger subjects. Numerous studies have found that vestibular function decreases with age (Enrietto, Jacobson, & Baloh, 1999; Paige, 1994; Peterka, Black, & Schoenhoff, 1990).

Similar, several studies have demonstrated decreased responses of both the spinal stretch reflex and the Hoffmann (H)-reflex, as well as an inability to properly modulate these spinal pathways in the elderly (Koceja & Mynark, 2000; Mynark, 2005; Penzer, Duchateau, & Baudry, 2015). Koceja and colleagues demonstrated that the amplitude of the H-reflex in elderly adults decreased as compared to young adults (Koceja, Markus, & Trimble, 1995). In a separate study the H-max value was significantly depressed in young subjects but increased in elderly subjects when standing (Angulo-Kinzler, Mynark, & Koceja, 1998).

Structural changes due to aging in spinal circuits affect their functionality and complicate motor control. Sensory and motor neurons and interneurons located in the spinal cord are involved and the age-related structural degeneration resulting in changes in the function of the affected nerves and neural circuits (Papegaaij, Taube, Baudry, Otten, & Hortobágyi, 2014). The H reflex known to be negatively affected by advancing age (Kido, Tanaka, & Stein, 2004; Tsuruike, Kitano, Koceja, & Riley, 2012).

Additionally, the greater decrease in the maximum evoked H-reflex (H-max), relative to the decrease in M-max, suggests that ageing negatively influences the sensory inflow to the motoneurons (Kido et al., 2004).

This is evident in the differential modulation of H-reflex gain between young and old subjects (Angulo-Kinzler et al., 1998; Tsuruike et al., 2012). However, the age-related changes of the vestibular and visual systems and their relationship with the segmental reflex are not clear. Knikou and Rymer (Knikou & Rymer, 2003) showed that changes in body orientation induced a significant facilitation of the H reflex magnitude in soleus motoneurons that were essentially independent of angular change in body orientation or of movement direction. However, Baudry et al. indicated that regardless of age the excitability of the corticomotoneuronal pathway is not modulated with changes in the sensory conditions during upright standing (S. Baudry, Penzer, & Duchateau, 2014).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of age-related vestibular and visual systems in static and dynamic conditioning on the modulation pattern of the soleus H reflex.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

The experiment was carried out on nine neurologically healthy elderly (mean age = 59.3 ± 12.8 yr.) and eight healthy young subjects (mean age = 22.1 ± 5.0 yr.), . Subjects completed a general screening questionnaire and were excluded if they reported any neurological disease, disorder or injury. Participants provided informed consent prior to participation. All subjects provided informed consent to the procedures as approved by the University's Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects.

H reflex and EMG procedures

Surface electrodes were used both for muscle recording and for H-reflex nerve stimulation. For the EMG recording electrode (Therapeutics Unlimited, Iowa City, IA), Ag/Ag–Cl electrodes with 2 cm intraelectrode distance were used. The electrodes consisted of an on-site preamplifier, thus minimizing movement artifact. One of two recording electrodes was positioned over the soleus muscle and the other was placed over the tibialis anterior muscle of subject's right leg. Specifically, the electrode on the soleus muscle was adhered parallel to the muscle fibres at the midpoint between the distal fibres of the gastrocnemius muscles and the proximal boarder of the Achilles tendon. The electrode for the tibialis anterior was placed lateral to the medial shaft of the tibia at one third the distance between the knee and the ankle. All electrodes were placed vertically along the presumed muscle fibre direction. Once in place, the recording and stimulating electrodes were not removed until the completion of testing, to ensure that exact placement was maintained.

For the H-reflex stimulating electrodes, a 0.8 cm-diameter cathode and a 4 cm diameter anode were used. To elicit the soleus H-reflex, a cathode electrode was placed in the popliteal fossa and an anode electrode was placed just superior to the patella of the right leg (Schieppati, 1987). Soleus H-reflexes were evoked through tibial nerve stimulation with a 1 ms duration pulse.

Maximal soleus H-reflex (H-max) and motor response (M-max) amplitudes were determined prior to testing at each condition while subjects were lying supine on a tilt table for standardization. The size of the test H-reflex was measured as the peak-to-peak amplitude. It has been demonstrated earlier that the susceptibility of the H-reflex to conditioning depends on the size of the control reflex (Crone et al., 1990).

For the H-reflex during the different experimental conditions, the intensity of the H-reflex stimulation was monitored by keeping constant a 5-10% M-wave preceding each H response (Schieppati, 1987), and throughout testing, special care was taken to ensure that the size of the small M-wave during each experimental trial was constant. The EMG signals were DC coupled from the electrodes to a high impedance

DC amplifier with low bias current requirements. All EMG signals were sampled at 2 kHz, amplified (gain = 1000), and band-pass filtered (20–450Hz).

For H-reflex measurements, the peak-to-peak amplitude of the signal was used as the dependent variable. To quantify the amount of muscle activity present prior to the H-reflex stimulation, the background EMG (bEMG) activity in the muscle prior to the H-reflex stimulation for each postural condition was calculated. After sampling, the bEMG was band passed filtered from 20 to 450 Hz, full-wave rectified and smoothed with a 25 Hz low-pass filter for the 50 ms prior to H-reflex stimulation.

Experimental protocols on the Tilt table procedures

The participants were barefoot their feet side-by-side in a comfortable position and arms hanging relaxed at their side and they were instructed to keep their head straight on the tilt table. Participants received 5 test H-reflex stimuli under two randomly administered conditions, static 60° and dynamic 30°-60° on a tilt table. Both tilt conditions were performed with vision and no vision (Figure 1).

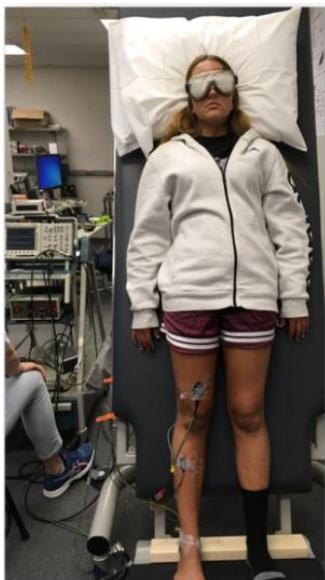


Figure 1. Experimental set-up with participant on the tilt table in a no-vision, static 60° condition.

Statistical analysis

A 3-way repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) 2 (groups: young/old) x 2 (condition: static/dynamic) x 2 (vision: vision/no vision/blind) was used to assess changes in H-reflexes applied to test for interaction and main effects for the dependent variable soleus H-reflex response. Significance was set at $p < .05$.

RESULTS

All data were expressed relative to the H-reflex amplitude at static position at 0° lying supine on the tilt table. The Tests of Within-Subjects Contrasts showed a significant 3-way interaction for the Group x Condition x Vision ($p = .038$). This interaction was further analysed. The young group showed an increase in the amplitude of the H-reflex in the static 60 degree condition whereas the old group inhibited the reflex at this condition (young: 15% facilitation and old 3% inhibition) when vision was available (first panel, Figure 2).

When vision was available in the dynamic condition, the young again facilitated the H-reflex (5% facilitation) whereas the old again inhibited the reflex (5% inhibition; second panel Figure 3).

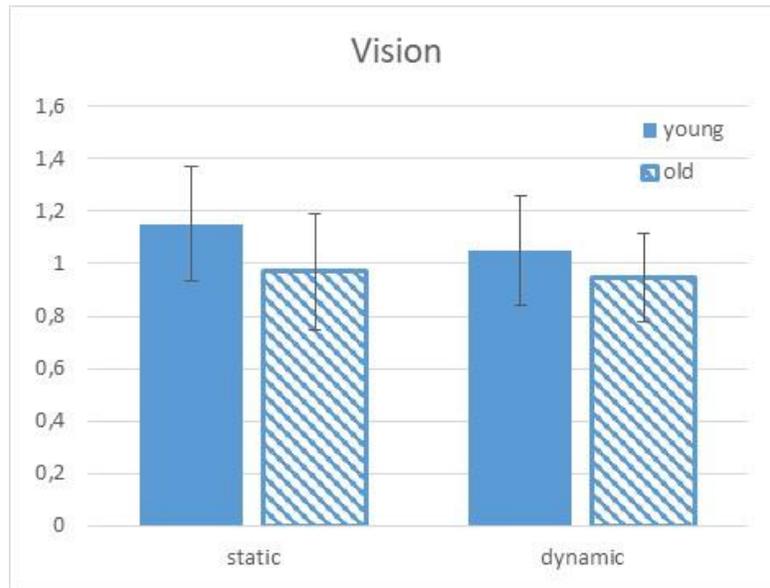


Figure 2. H-reflex results (standardize to the supine condition) for young and old in the visual experimental condition. Note that a value of 1.0 represents an H-reflex value equal to the supine condition. The young subjects produce a facilitation of the H-reflex in both the static and the dynamic conditions whereas the old produced an inhibition in both the static ad dynamic conditions.

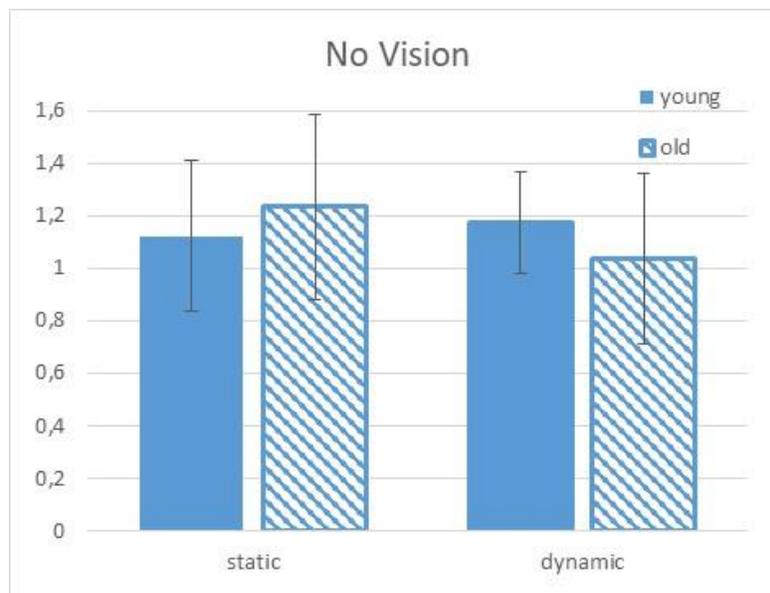


Figure 3. H-reflex results (standardize to the supine condition) for young and elderly groups in the no-vision experimental condition. Note that a value of 1.0 represents an H-reflex value equal to the static supine condition. The young subjects produce a facilitation of the H-reflex in both the static and the dynamic conditions whereas the elderly produce a greater facilitation in the static condition but less facilitation in the dynamic condition.

When examining within group differences, vision seemed to play a greater modulatory role for the old and not the young. When comparing the within group differences between the vision and the no vision conditions in the static tilt condition, the old group produced 27.3% more facilitation without vision, whereas the young group produced 3% inhibition. In the dynamic within group comparison, the groups produced similar results. The young group produced 11.6% more facilitation in the dynamic condition without vision whereas the old group produced a similar 9.5% greater facilitation in the no-vision condition.

DISCUSSION

The present results suggest differences in the manner in which young and old subjects modulate the soleus H reflex when the vestibular system is activated. It further demonstrates that the role of vision is more important in young subjects during dynamic tilt and conversely vision is more important in old subjects during static tilt. This leads us to conclude that the visual system is important even during periods of stable or static posture.

It has previously been shown that the ability of elderly subjects to adjust reflex excitability is related to postural stability (Koceja et al., 1995) and there are several important neural networks that could influence motoneuron excitability without changing the excitability of the membrane itself. One likely mechanism is presynaptic inhibition at the Ia terminal. Presynaptic interneurons could receive input from a variety of sensory systems and/or numerous supraspinal sites responsible for fine movement control; for example, the motor cortex, cerebellum and basal ganglia. There is evidence that presynaptic interneurons play a role in regulating the transfer of sensory information to the motoneurons and these interneurons have been shown to be more active during periods of increasing postural complexity (Zehr, 2002). However, pertinent to this study, the role of the vestibular system on reflex modulation is not very well defined and our results add to the complexity of these interactions. From our results, the young subjects produced an increase in the H-reflex in both the static and the dynamic conditions, whereas the older subjects demonstrated inhibition in both the static and dynamic conditions (see Figure 1).

Pinar et al., (2010) (Pinar, Kitano, & Koceja, 2010) originally suggested that presynaptic inhibition is a likely candidate mediating these changes, but did not specifically examine these interneurons. However, others have also suggested that presynaptic interneurons play an important role as a segmental gain control mechanism (Zehr, 2006) and has been suggested in a variety of studies to be an important regulatory spinal network tasks involving adjustments in postural control (Hultborn, Meunier, Pierrot-Deseilligny, & Shindo, 1987; Meunier & Pierrot-Deseilligny, 1989; Misiaszek, 2003). Baudry & Duchateau (2012) (Stéphane Baudry & Duchateau, 2012) proposed that presynaptic interneurons to the soleus Ia afferents increased their activity when vision was suppressed and when standing on a foam mat, but this adjustment was greater in older adults.

However, it is important to keep in mind that specific presynaptic interneurons have not been extensively studied in controlled experiments, and that there are other spinal mechanisms (e.g., reciprocal inhibition, recurrent inhibition, propriospinal connections) that could influence the excitability of the motoneuron during various tasks. Given that several experimental have been developed for use in humans that can indirectly assess presynaptic inhibition, reciprocal inhibition and recurrent inhibition (Pierrot-Deseilligny & Burke, 2005), future studies will undoubtedly unravel the complexity of motoneuron excitability changes in the intact human, and identify the exact spinal mechanism(s) responsible for these adjustments.

The present study was designed to test the interaction effect between aging, vision, and vestibular activation and there was a significant interaction between these three factors. In fact, in the no vision and dynamic tilt condition the elderly produce a greater facilitation in the static condition but less facilitation in the dynamic condition (see Figure 2). This result supports the research of Le Mouel, & Brette (2019) (Mouel & Brette, 2019) in that aging is associated with a progressive shift to a greater reliance on supraspinal pathways (descending drive) associated with a decreased contribution of Ia afferent input to control leg muscle activity during standing.

Postural stability depends on the integration of multisensory systems to produce appropriate motor outputs. Taking into account that in static 60° with vision there is a clear differences between young and old group (see figure 2) and following Appiah-Kubi (2019) (Appiah-Kubi & Wright, 2019), it can be deduced there is a reduction of vestibular information with aging, a vestibular and postural training alter sensory organization after a visual feedback-vestibular activation training protocol, this training should increase the stability suggesting a possible sensory reweighting through vestibular adaptation. This relation between vestibular rehabilitation and stability is consistent with the study of Iwasaki and Yamasoba (2015) (Iwasaki & Yamasoba, 2015) that found Vestibular rehabilitation is found to be effective in treating both unilateral and bilateral vestibular dysfunction.

Furthermore, in agreement with Osoba et al., (2019) (Osoba, Rao, Agrawal, & Lalwani, 2019), results show that elderly group was particularly dependent on vision to adjust soleus motoneuron excitability, the necessity of keeping good vision with aging and training vestibular poses a particular challenge for elderly adults and is linked to decreased falls risk.

CONCLUSIONS

These results suggest in young subjects the vestibular system produced a suppression of the H-reflex with or without visual input; however, in the old group vision was necessary for this suppression. The necessity of keep a good vision and the training of vestibular systems shows two main aspects of control posture. The interaction between the visual and vestibular systems as we age needs to be further explored.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All the authors have contributed substantially to the work reported in conceptualization, methodology, validation, formal analysis, investigation, procedures, resources, data curation, writing—original draft preparation, writing—review. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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