

1 Balance reactions to light touch displacements when standing on foam.  
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36 **Abstract**

37 We hypothesized that standing on an unstable surface would increase the relevance of light touch  
38 to standing balance, such that unexpected displacement of a touch reference would result in more  
39 consistent expression of balance corrections, compared to standing on a firm surface. Ten  
40 healthy participants stood on a foam block atop a force plate without vision, while lightly  
41 touching a reference. The touch plate was unexpectedly displaced forwards 10 times. Responses  
42 in tibialis anterior (TA) were observed more frequently across the 10 trials compared with  
43 standing on a firm surface. However, the responses evoked in trials 2-10 were functionally  
44 distinct from those following the first trial. We suggest the first trial responses represent balance  
45 corrective responses induced by the slip of the finger relative to the reference. In contrast, the  
46 subsequent responses in TA are likely related to an arm-tracking reaction that emerges,  
47 indicating a rapid repurposing of the tactile feedback.

48

49 **Highlights**

- 50 • Balance corrections are induced by the first touch displacement when standing on foam.  
51 • An arm-tracking behaviour emerges with subsequent touch displacements.  
52 • Light touch feedback is rapidly repurposed to meet the needs of the task.

53

54 **Keywords:** touch; balance; standing; posture; haptic; human

55 **Introduction**

56           Lightly touching a stable reference reduces sway during standing, particularly in the  
57 absence of vision [1]. It is argued that shear forces at the fingertip provide feedback about the  
58 direction, extent and speed of sway [1,2]. Furthermore, sway becomes entrained to an oscillating  
59 contact surface [3,4,5]. Taken together these findings suggest that sensory feedback from the  
60 fingertip encodes sway when a contact surface is expected to be a stable reference point.

61           Recently, we demonstrated that unexpected displacement of a touch reference evoked  
62 postural responses (PRs) in muscles of the ankle in approximately 60% of naïve participants [5].  
63 However, responses at the ankles were only observed following the first trial. It was suggested  
64 that the lack of PRs in some participants and the absence of PRs on repeated trials reflected a  
65 context-dependent weighting of the tactile feedback. That is, the contribution of tactile feedback  
66 to balance control likely depends upon the perceived relevance of the feedback to the  
67 performance of the task. If so, then increasing the relevance of the fingertip tactile feedback to  
68 the task of maintaining standing balance should result in more consistent expression of PRs  
69 across participants and with repeated exposures.

70           A common approach to increasing the postural demands is to introduce a compliant  
71 surface, such as a block of foam. Standing on foam increases sway that is further exacerbated in  
72 the absence of vision [6,7]. This increased sway is argued to arise from two factors. First, the  
73 foam redistributes pressure beneath the feet leading to a decrease in peak pressure and an  
74 increase in the contact area [8], leading to impaired, or at least unfamiliar, sensory feedback from  
75 the feet and ankles [9]. Second, the forces generated to stabilize sway compress the viscoelastic  
76 surface creating unexpected mechanical perturbations both when the compressive load is applied  
77 and released [10]. Light fingertip touch reduces sway when standing on foam, particularly when

78 vision is also occluded [7]. Dickstein et al. [7] argued that deficiencies in both surface and visual  
79 information are compensated for by increasing the weighting of the fingertip tactile feedback.

80 The objective of the present study was to increase the relevance of light touch feedback  
81 to the maintenance of posture by introducing a compliant surface. We expected that displacement  
82 of a light touch contact would more consistently evoke PRs at the ankle, compared with standing  
83 on a firm surface [5]. We further hypothesized that PRs at the ankles would be observed in more  
84 than just the first trial.

85

## 86 **Methods**

### 87 *Participants*

88 Ten healthy volunteers (age range 20-25; 7 female, 3 male) provided written consent for  
89 participation in a protocol approved by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board. It was  
90 essential that participants were unaware that the touch reference would be displaced. Therefore,  
91 participants were screened to verify they were unaware of the study's true purpose. Full  
92 disclosure was provided after the experimental session and participants were provided the  
93 opportunity to withdraw their consent.

### 94 *Set-up and apparatus*

95 Participants stood in stocking feet, shoulder width apart, on an ethylene-vinyl acetate  
96 (EVA) pad placed atop a force plate (AMTI OR6-7-1000). The 47.5 cm x 37.5 cm x 5 cm EVA  
97 pad was centered on the 50.8 cm x 46.4 cm surface of the force plate. The position of the feet  
98 was marked to ensure consistent placement for each task.

99 In some tasks participants were asked to touch a brushed aluminum plate (3.75 cm wide x  
100 7.5 cm long). The touch plate was positioned so that the tip of the right index finger was centered

101 on the plate, with the finger bent such that the distal phalanx was vertical, the forearm was in a  
102 horizontal posture, and the upper arm was vertical, such that the elbow was approximately 90°.   
103 The other fingers and thumb were curled into the palm to prevent contacting the plate. The left  
104 arm was free to hang naturally.

105 The touch plate was mounted upon a positioning stage (LinTech 130 Series) driven by a  
106 two-phase stepper motor (Applied Motion Products 5023-124). The entire apparatus was  
107 mounted on a force transducer (AMTI MC3A-100) to measure the vertical load applied by the  
108 participant when touching the plate. Participants received an auditory cue if the applied force  
109 exceeded 1 N. White noise was delivered through noise-canceling headphones during all trials to  
110 mask any sounds created by the motor.

#### 111 *Protocol*

112 It was important for participants to perceive the touch plate as a stable reference.  
113 Therefore, participants performed three sham tasks prior to the experimental task: standing on  
114 foam with a) eyes open and both hands at their sides, b) eyes open while lightly touching the  
115 touch plate, and c) both hands at their sides, but with their vision occluded by darkened goggles.  
116 Each sham task was performed for 2 min. For the fourth, experimental task participants stood on  
117 foam with occluded vision while lightly touching the touch plate. After approximately 30s, the  
118 touch plate was unexpectedly displaced 12.5 mm, with a peak velocity of 124 mm/s. Ten such  
119 displacements were delivered. Between displacements the touch plate was slowly (2.5 mm/s)  
120 returned to the starting position while the participant maintained contact. The touch plate  
121 remained stationary 2-8 s before the next displacement. All displacements were in the forward  
122 direction. The fourth task required approximately 10 min to complete.

#### 123 *Data collection and analysis*

124 Electromyographic (EMG) recordings were obtained from right anterior deltoid (AD),  
125 posterior deltoid (PD), sternocleidomastoid (SCM), tibialis anterior (TA), and soleus (SOL).  
126 Two Ag-AgCl surface electrodes (NeuroPlus A10040) were placed over the bellies of the  
127 muscles, aligned to the predicted path of the muscle fibers, with an inter-electrode distance of 2  
128 cm. Ground electrodes were placed over the clavicle and tibia. EMG signals were amplified and  
129 band-pass filtered (30 Hz – 1 kHz, 60 Hz notch, Grass P511 amplifiers, Astro-Med) prior to  
130 digitization. Electrogoniometers (Biometrics, Newport, UK) were placed across the right ankle  
131 and elbow joints. All signals were digitized at 4 kHz (National Instruments PCI-MIO-16E-4).  
132 Data analysis occurred offline using custom-written LabView v8.2 routines. EMG signals were  
133 digitally full-wave rectified and then low-pass filtered at 50 Hz (dual-pass 2<sup>nd</sup> order  
134 Butterworth). The mechanical signals were low-pass filtered at 20 Hz. The center of pressure  
135 (COP) position was calculated from the force plate force and moment.

136 To determine if touch plate displacement evoked EMG responses a two standard  
137 deviations band around the mean EMG activity for the 100 ms prior to the perturbation was  
138 calculated. A response was considered present if the EMG trace exceeded this band for at least  
139 20 continuous milliseconds. Responses with onset latencies >200 ms were not considered for  
140 further analysis, in keeping with the procedures of Misiaszek et al. [5]. Response amplitudes  
141 were calculated as the mean rectified EMG for the first 75 ms of the response, normalized to  
142 maximum voluntary contraction (MVC). Participants swayed considerably while standing on the  
143 foam making it unfeasible to estimate perturbation-related sway in the COP data using the two  
144 standard deviations band approach. As shown in Fig. 3A, perturbation-related sway events were  
145 apparent in some trials (particularly the first trial). To determine if the perturbations induced  
146 systematic changes in COP position, the change in COP position 300 ms following the onset of

147 the touch plate displacement relative to the position at perturbation onset was calculated for each  
148 trial. The change in COP position was calculated for all trials. Changes in joint angles were also  
149 estimated using this approach.

### 150 *Statistical Procedures*

151 The frequency of responses while standing on foam were compared to the data reported  
152 in [5] for standing on a firm surface. Fisher's Exact Tests were used to compare the response  
153 frequencies for each muscle following the first trial between the firm and foam surfaces. Fisher's  
154 Exact Tests were also used to compare the response frequencies in trials 2 through 10 between  
155 surface types. To determine if response latencies and amplitudes varied with repeated trials the  
156 first identified response was compared to the last identified response from a participant using  
157 two-tailed paired *t*-tests. The first and last responses need not have been the first and tenth trials.  
158 Data were excluded from this analysis if fewer than 2 responses were observed in a given muscle  
159 for a participant. Two-tailed paired *t*-tests compared average onset latencies between TA and  
160 AD. Two-tailed single sample *t*-tests compared the change in COP<sub>A-P</sub> position, change in ankle  
161 angle, and change in elbow angle, against hypothesized values of 0 (no change). Two-tailed  
162 Student's *t*-tests compared background EMG in TA, SOL and AD from the current study against  
163 data from standing on a firm surface [5]. Significant differences were identified when  $p < 0.05$ .

164

### 165 **Results**

166 Unexpected forward displacement of the light touch reference evoked short latency  
167 responses in TA and/or AD when participants stood on foam. Figure 1 shows EMG traces from  
168 TA for a single participant that generated a clear response following the first exposure to the  
169 displacement (trial 1) with an onset latency of 117.5 ms. Comparable responses were observed

170 with subsequent trials, including the 10<sup>th</sup> trial (with onset latencies ranging between 98.25 –  
171 119.75 ms).

### 172 *EMG response frequency*

173 Figure 2 summarizes the response occurrence across participants. TA responses were  
174 evoked in all participants at least twice across the 10 trials. At least 1 response was observed in  
175 AD of all but 1 participant. First trial responses were observed in TA in 6 of 10 participants,  
176 which was identical to the proportion of first trial responses previously observed (12 of 20  
177 participants) while standing on a firm surface. In addition, 2 of 10 participants responded with  
178 AD on the first trial, compared with 10 of 20 when standing on a firm surface resulting in a  
179 Fisher's Exact  $p=0.235$ . In subsequent trials (trials 2-10), responses in TA were observed more  
180 frequently (Fisher's Exact  $p<0.001$ ) across all participants when standing on foam (62 of 90  
181 trials), than when standing on a firm surface (0 of 180 trials). AD activation was observed less  
182 frequently (Fisher's Exact  $p<0.001$ ) in subsequent trials while standing on foam (45 of 90 trials),  
183 compared with standing on a firm surface (133 of 180 trials). Responses in SCM were rare, with  
184 only 1 response observed across all 100 trials.

### 185 *EMG response latency and amplitude*

186 The average latency of TA responses was  $102.3 \pm 14.25$  ms (mean  $\pm$  s.d.) across all trials  
187 and participants. There was no apparent change in TA response latency with repeated trials as the  
188 average latency of the first evoked response ( $104.9 \pm 23.95$  ms) was not different ( $t_{(9)}=0.36$ ,  
189  $p=0.73$ ) from the last evoked response ( $106.8 \pm 22.17$  ms) across participants. Responses evoked  
190 in AD had an average latency of  $81.4 \pm 23.68$  ms across all trials and participants. A paired  
191 comparison of the average latency of TA against AD indicated that the AD responses had a  
192 shorter latency ( $t_{(8)}=2.93$ ,  $p=0.019$ ). Repeated trials did not affect latencies of the AD responses

193 as the average latency of the first evoked response ( $86.7 \pm 26.17$  ms) was not different ( $t_{(8)}=0.69$ ,  
194  $p=0.51$ ) from the last evoked response ( $80.1 \pm 23.30$  ms) across participants.

195 Response amplitudes did not systematically vary with repeated trials. The average  
196 amplitude of the first response in TA was  $1.4 \pm 1.55$  %MVC, which was not different ( $t_{(9)}=0.70$ ,  
197  $p=0.50$ ) from the last response of  $1.9 \pm 2.23$  %MVC. The average amplitude of the first response  
198 in AD of  $5.7 \pm 4.55$  %MVC was not different ( $t_{(8)}= 1.61$ ,  $p=0.15$ ) from the last response of  $4.6 \pm$   
199  $4.47$  %MVC.

200 Background EMG activity did not systematically vary with repeated trials. The average  
201 background activity in TA prior to the first trial ( $3.5 \pm 0.53$  %MVC) was not different ( $t_{(9)}=0.71$ ,  
202  $p=0.50$ ) to the last trial ( $3.7 \pm 1.51$  %MVC). The average background activity in SOL prior to the  
203 first trial ( $17.4 \pm 6.81$  %MVC) was also not different ( $t_{(9)}=0.71$ ,  $p=0.50$ ) to the last trial ( $15.4 \pm$   
204  $3.04$  %MVC). The average background activity in AD prior to the first trial ( $4.7 \pm 2.84$  %MVC)  
205 was not different ( $t_{(9)}=0.55$ ,  $p=0.60$ ) to the last trial ( $5.13 \pm 4.10$  %MVC). Standing on foam did  
206 not overtly influence the background activity in TA or AD. The average background activity in  
207 TA was  $3.3 \pm 0.81$  %MVC (firm) and  $3.6 \pm 0.75$  %MVC (foam), which were not different  
208 (Student's  $t_{(29)}=0.86$ ,  $p=0.40$ ). The average background activity in AD was  $4.4 \pm 1.54$  %MVC  
209 (firm) and  $4.3 \pm 2.20$  %MVC (foam), which were not different ( $t_{(29)}=0.11$ ,  $p=0.91$ ). In contrast,  
210 background activity in SOL increased ( $t_{(29)}=2.37$ ,  $p=0.025$ ) when standing on foam ( $17.0 \pm 4.15$   
211 %MVC), compared with standing on a firm surface ( $13.3 \pm 3.98$  %MVC).

### 212 *COP<sub>A-P</sub>, elbow and ankle angles*

213 Figure 3A depicts traces from one participant. The traces are vertically aligned to the  
214 position at the time of perturbation onset (0 ms). As can be seen, the consequences of the first  
215 trial (thick grey traces) are distinctly different from the subsequent trials (thin black traces).

216 Following the first trial there is a distinct forward sway of the COP<sub>A-P</sub>, beginning at about 200  
217 ms. Following subsequent trials the position of the COP<sub>A-P</sub> appears to either be unaffected, or  
218 sway backwards. The elbow joint exhibits a distinct flexion at 200 ms in the first trial, but is  
219 extended in later trials. The ankle joint shows a modest dorsiflexion at 200 ms in the first trial,  
220 but little reaction in subsequent trials.

221 To characterize the adaptation in mechanical events with repeated trials the change in  
222 COP<sub>A-P</sub> position, elbow angle and ankle angle was determined 300 ms following the perturbation  
223 onset, relative to the positions at perturbation onset. The average changes in COP<sub>A-P</sub> position and  
224 joint angles across participants are depicted in Figure 3B. It can be seen that the first trial  
225 resulted in distinctly different outcomes than the subsequent trials. Specifically, the COP<sub>A-P</sub>  
226 position indicates that all participants swayed forwards on the first trial. Thereafter a consistent  
227 pattern of sway was not observed resulting in a change in COP<sub>A-P</sub> position near zero, with  
228 relatively large variability. The mean change in COP<sub>A-P</sub> for the first trial was  $2.9 \pm 1.12$  mm,  
229 which is significantly different from a hypothesized value of 0 mm ( $t_{(9)}=8.16, p<0.001$ ). In  
230 contrast, the mean change in COP<sub>A-P</sub> for the tenth trial was  $-1.3 \pm 2.67$  mm, which is not different  
231 from 0 mm ( $t_{(9)}=1.56, p=0.15$ ). The elbow flexed following the first trial across all participants  
232 with an average change in angle of  $-1.7 \pm 1.97^\circ$ , significantly less than a hypothesized value of  $0^\circ$   
233 ( $t_{(9)}=2.67, p=0.026$ ). However, for all subsequent trials the elbow extended or demonstrated very  
234 little difference 300 ms following the displacement. For the tenth trial, this resulted in an average  
235 change in angle of  $2.2 \pm 1.61^\circ$ , which is significantly greater than  $0^\circ$  ( $t_{(9)}=4.41, p=0.0017$ ). All  
236 participants demonstrated a modest dorsiflexion following the first trial, resulting in an average  
237 change in ankle angle of  $-0.3 \pm 0.39^\circ$  300 ms following the displacement, which was different  
238 from  $0^\circ$  ( $t_{(9)}=2.35, p=0.043$ ). In contrast, the change in ankle angle on subsequent trials varied

239 across participants and trials. As a result, the average tended to be a positive difference, or  
240 plantarflexion, but not much different from 0°. The tenth trial average change in angle across  
241 participants was  $0.1 \pm 0.43^\circ$ , not different from 0° ( $t_{(9)}=0.68, p=0.52$ ).

242

## 243 **Discussion**

244 As observed previously, only about 60% of participants react to the first exposure of a  
245 touch displacement with activation of TA [5]. Increasing the instability by standing on foam did  
246 not change this rate. The evoked responses in TA on the first touch plate displacement likely  
247 represent a PR [5]. The short-latency responses in TA precede a forward sway in the COP<sub>A-P</sub> and  
248 dorsiflexion at the ankle, coupled with flexion at the elbow. This behaviour is consistent with a  
249 reaction that would correct for a backwards fall. That is, a backwards fall would result in a  
250 relative forward displacement of the touch. Activation of TA would counteract a backwards fall,  
251 dorsiflexing the ankle and drawing the body forward. The coincidental flexion at the elbow is  
252 likely a coordinated response integrated within the PR to ensure contact with the touch reference  
253 is maintained [11].

254 Subsequent exposures (trials 2-10) of the touch displacement evoked a change in  
255 behaviour that we suggest represents an arm-tracking strategy [5]. An arm-tracking strategy is  
256 suggested by the increased prevalence of evoked responses in AD and progressive arm extension  
257 behaviour. In addition, the consistent forward sway observed after the first trial was no longer  
258 apparent. Interestingly, all participants exhibited responses in TA in trials 2-10 when standing on  
259 foam, in stark contrast to the lack of responses for participants standing on a firm surface [5].  
260 The increased occurrence of responses in TA was not due to greater activation of TA when  
261 standing on foam as background TA activity was comparable to that seen when standing on a

262 firm surface. It is possible that the activity in TA during the emergence of the arm-tracking  
263 strategy is related to an “associated postural adjustments” (APA) accompanying the focal arm  
264 movements [12,13]. However, muscle activity associated with APAs typically precedes that of  
265 the focal movement, which was not observed here, and activation of TA is not typically  
266 associated with APAs with arm extension behaviours. The functional relevance of the TA  
267 activation in trials 2-10 is not easily delineated. Nevertheless, it is apparent that TA is activated  
268 in subsequent trials when standing on an unstable surface and is incorporated as part of a  
269 distinctly different behaviour than what is observed with the first trial.

270 PRs typically demonstrate first trial effects wherein the initial exposure to a disturbance  
271 evokes responses that are larger in amplitude than subsequent trials, but with generally unaltered  
272 timing [14]. The first trial responses we report do not appear to be consistent with typical first  
273 trial effects as the forward sway response is abandoned and arm-extension replaces an initial  
274 arm-flexion response. Therefore, this is not a simple habituation process. It is possible that the  
275 displacement of 12.5 mm was large enough to allow the participants to become aware of the first  
276 disturbance so as to lead them to disregard future perturbations. Following the experiment all  
277 participants were asked to describe their experience, including indicating if they detected any  
278 disturbances. Indeed, by the last trial all participants identified that the touch plate moved.  
279 However, most participants (8/10) indicated fewer than 5 displacements. Moreover, consistent  
280 with our previous study [5], some participants initially believed the support surface had moved.  
281 These anecdotal accounts make it unlikely that the change in behaviour after the first trial is the  
282 result of conscious awareness of the nature of the initial disturbance. Alternatively, it might be  
283 that the first trial responses observed here are startle responses. It was recently argued that PRs  
284 include a startle component [15]. However, startle typically evokes responses in SCM (including

285 from balance disturbances [15,16]), which was not observed here. In addition, the startle  
286 component to first trial responses appears to amplify an underlying PR [15]. The first trial  
287 response we observed was a distinctly different behaviour from the subsequent trials, making it  
288 unlikely that the difference can be explained by a startle component alone.

289         The most striking finding of this study is the immediacy with which participants changed  
290 their motor response after the first trial. The change in behaviour was robust even though the  
291 stimulus did not change (slip of the touch plate) and no instructions were offered to the  
292 participants. Nevertheless, all participants subsequently utilized the tactile cue to “trigger” an  
293 arm-tracking task. For those participants that initially engaged a PR, this required identifying that  
294 their response was functionally inappropriate and then quickly determining an alternative  
295 solution to the problem posed by the slip-related tactile feedback. This rapid “repurposing” of the  
296 tactile cues is worthy of further study as the selection of appropriate motor responses and the  
297 ability to quickly adapt based upon experience are important to meet the needs of maintaining  
298 stability in challenging environments. The problem is similar to that faced in other motor tasks,  
299 such as reaching, when multiple possible movements might be considered, before one is decided  
300 upon and implemented [17]. It has been suggested that when such challenges are encountered  
301 multiple motor solutions are encoded in parallel before selecting the one that is implemented  
302 [18]. A similar process could explain the rapid nature by which participants switched from a PR  
303 strategy to an arm-tracking strategy in the present study.

304

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308 **References**

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350

351 **Figure Legends**

352 **Figure 1** Data traces from one participant (participant #4) showing the EMG activity in TA for  
353 all 10 forward touch plate displacements. Each full-wave rectified and low-pass filtered (50 Hz)  
354 EMG trace begins 100 ms prior to the onset of the touch plate displacement (indicated by the  
355 vertical dashed line). The small vertical lines indicate the onset of an evoked response in each  
356 trace when present. The EMG scale bar represents 5% MVC.

357

358 **Figure 2** Grid indicating the presence of detectable EMG responses in TA and AD following  
359 forward touch plate displacements across all participants and trials. The darkened cells indicate  
360 trials for which a response was present.

361

362 **Figure 3** (A) Data traces from one participant showing the  $COP_{A-P}$ , Elbow and Ankle angles for  
363 all 10 forward touch plate displacements. The first trial is depicted as the thick grey trace, while  
364 trials 2-10 are depicted as the thin black traces. Each trace begins 200 ms prior to the onset of the  
365 touch plate displacement (indicated by the vertical dashed line) and has been aligned vertically to  
366 the position at displacement onset. (B) Group averages of the change in  $COP_{A-P}$ , Elbow and  
367 Ankle angles 300 ms after touch plate displacement onset. Error bars indicate standard deviation.  
368 The dashed horizontal line indicates no change. Positive values in the  $COP_{A-P}$  data represent  
369 forward differences, while positive values in the joint angles represent extension and  
370 plantarflexion.





