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The Physiology Of Balance

The **vestibular system** is the sensory apparatus of the **inner ear** that helps the body maintain its postural **equilibrium**. The information furnished by the vestibular system is also essential for coordinating the position of the **head** and the movement of the eyes. There are two sets of end organs in the inner ear, or labyrinth: the **semicircular canals**, which respond to **rotational** movements (angular acceleration); and the **utricle** and **saccul**e within the **vestibule**, which respond to changes in the position of the head with respect to gravity (linear acceleration). The information these organs deliver is proprioceptive in character, dealing with events within the body itself, rather than exteroceptive, dealing with events outside the body, as in the case of the responses of the cochlea to **sound**. Functionally these organs are closely related to the cerebellum and to the reflex centres of the **spinal cord** and **brainstem** that govern the movements of the eyes, neck, and limbs.

Although the vestibular organs and the cochlea are derived embryologically from the same formation, the otic vesicle, their association in the inner ear seems to be a matter more of convenience than of necessity. From both the developmental and the structural point of view, the kinship of the vestibular organs with the **lateral line system** of the fish is readily apparent. The lateral line system is made up of a series of small sense organs located in the skin of the head and along the sides of the body of fishes. Each **organ** contains a **crista**, sensory hair cells, and a cupula, as found in the **ampullae of the semicircular ducts**. The cristae respond to waterborne vibrations and to pressure changes.