



Senior Series

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Preventing Falls Among Older Adults

Falls are the leading cause of injury deaths among older adults. In the United States, more than one-third of adults age 65 and over fall each year. Of those who fall, 20 percent to 30 percent will experience serious injuries, such as head trauma, broken bones, or hip fractures. These injuries may limit the ability of older adults to get around or live independently. Those who are not injured may develop a fear of falling, which may increase their actual risk of falling. Many people limit their activities after a fall, which may reduce strength, physical fitness, and mobility.

Risk Factors for Falling

Aging can bring changes in vision, hearing, reflexes, and muscle strength. These physical changes may make people more likely to fall. Older adults may have disorders

that affect their coordination and balance, such as arthritis, vertigo, cognitive impairment, diabetes, or cardiovascular disease. Medications, alcohol, or being too hot or cold may make people dizzy, increasing their risk of falling.

The environment or situation may also cause people to fall. Poor lighting, slippery floors, scatter rugs, furniture, and objects inappropriately placed are examples of common hazards in the environment. Clothing or footwear may also increase the risk of falls.

Steps to Prevent Falls

The good news is that falls are preventable. Taking care of your overall health will reduce the risk of falling. Here are a few suggestions to help prevent falls:

1. Have your vision and hearing tested often. Wear glasses if

recommended, taking time to adjust to a new prescription. Be sure you wear a properly fitted hearing aid.

2. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about medications you are taking and the side effects. Ask if they will affect your coordination or balance, and what you can do to reduce your risk of falling.
3. Talk with a medical professional about planning an exercise program that is suitable for you. Exercise helps improve strength, muscle tone, and balance while keeping your joints flexible. Mild weight-bearing exercise, such as walking, may help you prevent bone loss due to osteoporosis.
4. Limit the amount of alcohol that you drink. A small amount can interfere with medication and may affect balance.
5. Do not get up too quickly after lying down. You may become dizzy.
6. Use a cane or walker for balance if you feel unsteady. Be especially careful when walking on uneven pavement or on wet and icy surfaces.
7. Wear low-heeled, rubber-soled shoes with good support. Avoid wearing just socks or smooth-soled slippers on waxed floors or stairs.

Home Safety Checklist

Simple changes in the home can help prevent falls. The following tips are recommended to ensure a safe environment:

Stairways and halls should have good lighting and be clutter-free. Light switches should be at the top and bottom of the stairs. Carpet should be firmly attached; avoid using runners unless they have slip-resistant backing. Use reflective tape at top and bottom of stairs. Handrails should be tightly fastened and run the entire length along both sides of the stairs.

Living areas should have furniture appropriately arranged to avoid interference with walking. Sofas and chairs should be easy to get out of. Be sure area rugs are well-secured and cords (electrical and telephone) are not in walking paths.

In the bedroom, a night light or light switch should be located within reach of the bed. Telephones should also be near the bed and easy to reach. Keep the floor clear of clutter and floor coverings firmly attached to the floor.

Bathrooms should contain grab bars near the toilet and bathtub. Soap build-up should be removed to prevent slipping. Use nonskid tub mats or abrasive strips inside the tub and non-skid carpet on the floor. A

raised toilet seat can help those who have difficulty standing up or sitting down. A night light is convenient for middle-of-the night trips.

In the kitchen, spills should be cleaned up immediately. Place items on lower shelves for easy reach. Use a step stool on an even surface when reaching for something on a high shelf. Keep emergency numbers close to the telephone.

Outside—patio, yard should be clear of obstacles on the walkways. Repair cracks in the sidewalk or on the steps. Ice should be removed from stairs or walkways.

Many counties and states have agencies that will assist older adults

with home modification programs to help prevent falls. Check with your local area agency on aging or health department to see if there is a program in your area.

Sources

National Institute on Aging, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, *AgePage, Falls and Fractures* (February 2008).

Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Falls Among Older Adults: An Overview* (April 2008).

Falls are the leading cause of injury deaths among older adults. Simple changes in the home can help prevent falls.

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