

Falls Among Older Adults

How Often Falls Occur

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

- One out of three adults age 65 and older fall each year.
- At 80 years of age, over half of seniors fall **annually**.
- Among older adults (those 65 or older) falls are the leading cause of death due to an injury.
- Falls are the most common cause of hospital admissions for trauma.
- Most fractures among older adults are caused by falls.
- The most common fractures are fractures of the spine, hip, forearm, leg, ankle, pelvis, upper arm and hand.

Causes

The causes of falls are known as risk factors. Although no single risk factor causes all falls, the greater the number of risk factors to which an individual is exposed, the greater the probability of a fall and the more likely the results of the fall will threaten the person's independence. According to Colorado State University there are generally five risk factors.

Risk Factor #1 Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis is a condition where bones become more porous, less resistant to stress and; therefore, more prone to fractures. Osteoporosis is caused by hormonal changes, calcium and vitamin D deficiency and a decrease in physical activity.

Risk Factor #2 Lack of Physical Activity

Failure to exercise regularly results in poor muscle tone, decreased strength and loss of bone mass and flexibility. All contribute to falls and the severity of injury due to falls.

Risk Factor #3 Impaired Vision

Age-related vision diseases can increase the risk of falling. Cataracts and glaucoma alter older people's depth perception, vision acuity, peripheral vision and susceptibility to glare. These limitations hinder their ability to safely negotiate their environment even in their own home. Younger people use visual cues to perceive an imminent fall and take corrective action. Older adults with visual impairments do not have this advantage to the same extent.

Risk Factor #4 Medications

Sedatives, anti-depressants and pain medications can contribute to falls by reducing mental alertness, worsening balance and gait, and causing drops in systolic blood pressure while standing. Additionally, people taking multiple medications are at greater risk of falling.

Risk Factor #5 Environmental Hazards

At least one-third of all falls in the elderly involve environmental hazards in the home. The most common hazard for falls is tripping over objects on the floor. Other factors include poor lighting, loose rugs, lack of grab bars or poorly mounted grab bars and unsteady furniture.

Prevention

1. Make an appointment with your doctor

Make a list of your prescription and over-the-counter medication and supplements and bring it to your appointment. Your doctor can review your medications for side effects and interactions that may increase your risk of falling.

Have you fallen before?

Tell your doctor the details including when, where and how you fell. Be prepared to discuss instances when you almost fell but were caught by someone or managed to grab hold of something just in time. Details like these may help your doctor identify specific fall-prevention strategies.

Certain eye and ear disorders may increase your risk of falls. Be prepared to discuss your health conditions and how comfortable you are when you walk – for example, do you feel any dizziness, joint pain, numbness or shortness of breath when you walk? Your doctor may evaluate your muscle strength, balance and walking style as well.

2. Keep Moving

Physical activity can go a long way toward fall prevention. With your doctor's okay, consider activities such as walking, water workouts or tai chi – a gentle exercise that involves slow and graceful dance-like movements. Such activities reduce the risk of fall by improving strength, balance, coordination and flexibility.

3. Wear sensible shoes

Consider changing footwear as part of your fall-prevention plan. High heels, floppy slippers and shoes with slick soles can make you slip, stumble and fall. So can walking in your stocking feet. Buy properly fitting, sturdy shoes with nonskid soles. Avoid shoes with extra-thick soles. Choose lace-up shoes instead of slip-ons. And keep the laces tied. If you have trouble tying laces, select footwear with fabric fasteners.

4. Remove Home Hazards

Take a look around your home. Your living room, kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, hallways and stairways may be filled with hazards. See the attached “Walk-Through of Your Home” to identify possible problems that may lead to falling.

5. Light up your living space

Keep your home brightly lit to avoid tripping on objects that are hard to see. Place night lights in your bedroom, bathroom and hallways. Place a lamp within reach of your bed for middle-of-the-night needs. Make clear paths to light switches that aren't near room entrances. Consider trading traditional light switches for glow-in-the-dark or illuminated switches.

6. Use assistive devices

Your doctor might recommend using a cane or walker to keep you steady. Other assistive devices are hand rails for both sides of stairways, non-slip treads for bare-wood steps, a raised toilet seat or one with armrests, grab bars for the shower or tub and a sturdy plastic seat for the shower or tub. A hand-held shower nozzle for bathing while sitting down is also helpful.

If necessary, ask your doctor for a referral to an occupational therapist. He or she can help you brainstorm other fall-prevention strategies. Some solutions are easily installed and relatively inexpensive. Others may require professional help or a larger investment. If you're concerned about the cost, remember that an investment in fall prevention is an investment in your independence.

A Walk-Through for your Home

It is useful to conduct a walk-through of your home to identify possible problems that may lead to falling. A home visit by an interior designer or occupational therapist might also be useful in that they are trained to identify risk factors and recommend appropriate actions.

Outdoors

- Repair cracks and abrupt edges of sidewalks and driveways.
- Install handrails on stairs and steps.
- Remove high doorway thresholds Trim shrubbery along the pathway to the home.
- Keep walk areas clear of clutter, rocks and tools.
- Keep walk areas clear of snow and ice.
- Install adequate lighting by doorways and along walkways leading to doors.

All Living Spaces

- Use a change in color to denote changes in surface types or levels.
- Secure rugs with nonskid tape as well as carpet edges.
- Avoid throw rugs.
- Remove oversized furniture and objects.
- Have at least one phone extension in each level of the home and post emergency numbers at each phone.
- Add electrical outlets.
- Reduce clutter.
- Check lighting for adequate illumination and glare control.
- Maintain nightlights or motion-sensitive lighting throughout home.
- Use contrast in paint, furniture and carpet colors.
- Install electronic emergency response system if needed.

Bathrooms

- Install grab bars on walls around the tub and beside the toilet, strong enough to hold your weight.
- Add nonskid mats or appliques to bathtubs.
- Mount liquid soap dispenser on the bathtub-wall.
- Install a portable, hand-held shower head.
- Add a padded bath or shower seat.
- Install a raised toilet seat if needed.
- Use nonskid mats or carpet on floor surfaces that may get wet.

Kitchen

- Keep commonly used items within easy reach.
- Use a sturdy step stool when you need something from a high shelf.
- Make sure appliance cords are out of the way.
- Avoid using floor polish or wax in order to reduce slick surfaces.

Living, Dining and Family Rooms

- Keep electrical and telephone cords out of the way.
- Arrange furniture so that you can easily move around it (especially low coffee tables).
- Make sure chairs and couches are easy to get in and out of.
- Remove caster wheels from furniture.
- Use television remote control and cordless phone.

Bedroom

- Put in a bedside light with a switch that is easy to turn on and off (or a touch lamp).
- Have a nightlight.
- Locate telephone within reach of bed.
- Adjust height of bed to make it easy to get in and out of.
- Have a firm chair, with arms, to sit and dress.

Stairways, Hallways and Pathways

- Keep free of clutter
- Make sure carpet is secured and get rid of throw rugs.
- Install tightly fastened hand rails running the entire length and along both sides of stairs.
- Handrails should be 34 inches high and have a diameter of about 1.5 inches.
- Apply brightly colored tape to the face of the steps to make them more visible.
- Optimal stair dimensions are 7.2 inch riser heights with either an 11 or 12 inch tread width.
- Have adequate lighting in stairways, hallways and pathways, with light switches placed at each end.