

Falls Among Older Adults

Each year, one in every three adults age 65 and older falls. Falls can lead to moderate to severe injuries, such as hip fractures and head traumas, and can even increase the risk of early death.

How big is this problem?

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC),

- One out of three adults age 65 and older fall each year.
- Among those age 65 and older, falls are the leading cause of injury death. They are also the most common cause of nonfatal injuries and hospital admissions for trauma.
- In 2007, over 18,000 older adults died from unintentional fall injuries.
- The death rates from falls among older men and women have risen sharply over the past decade.
- In 2008, 2.1 million nonfatal fall injuries among older adults were treated in emergency departments and more than 559,000 of these patients were hospitalized.
- In 2000, direct medical costs of falls totaled a little over \$19 billion—\$179 million for fatal falls and \$19 billion for nonfatal fall injuries.

How can we help the elderly to prevent falls

The American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons estimates that 30% to 40% of all falls can be prevented. Falls are not just the result of getting older. Falls are usually caused by a number of things. You can lower the chances of falling by encouraging the elderly to do some of these things:

1. Begin a regular exercise program.

Exercise is one of the most important ways to reduce your chances of falling. Exercises that improve balance and coordination (like Tai Chi) are the most helpful. Ask your doctor or health care worker about the best type of exercise program for you.

2. Make your home safer by doing the following:

- Ask someone to move your furniture so that you can walk through rooms without having to walk around furniture.
- Remove your throw rugs or if you can't stand to let them go secure them to the floor with double-sided tape or non-slip backing.
- Pick up the clutter, books, magazines, boxes, and other objects on the floor.
- Make sure that all electrical cords, phone cords, and oxygen tubing is taped next to the wall so that you can't trip over them.
- Make sure that your stairs including handrails are in good repair. Place a piece of brightly colored tape on the top and bottom stair so that you can see when you have reached the top or bottom. Make sure that the lights work so you can see the stairs. It's a good idea to have a light switch at the top and bottom of the staircase.
- Keep the kitchen items that you use regularly on lower shelves, about waist high.
- Place the lamps in your bedroom close to the bed where they are easy to reach.
- Put in a night-light or two so that the path from your bed to your bathroom is always well lit.
- In the bathroom place a non-slip mat or self stick strips on the floor of the tub and shower. Don't use bars of soap or bottles of shampoo in the shower. Install a liquid soap, shampoo, and conditioner dispenser on the wall of the shower within easy reach. Have a handyman or carpenter install grab bars inside your tub and next to your toilet.
- Consider a sitting bench or stool in the shower and an elevated toilet seat.
- Make sure that all of the light bulbs in your home are at least 60 watts or brighter.
- Have someone trim the plants beside the walkway into your home so they don't obstruct the path.
- Make sure that the batteries in your smoke detector and carbon monoxide detectors are changed every year. If you don't have these detectors have some installed.

3. Have your health care provider review your medicines.

4. Have your vision checked. Poor vision can increase your risk of falling.
5. Have a portable phone or cellular phone that you can carry with you around the house, one that you can use to call for help if you need it.
6. Consider wearing an alarm device that will bring help in case you fall when you are alone.
7. Wear sturdy shoes with thin, non-slip soles. Do not walk around your home with stocking feet.
8. If you have a cane or walker, use it.
9. Eat a balanced diet that includes calcium and vitamin D to help build strong bones.
10. Moderate your consumption of alcoholic beverages.

Good fall prevention activities will help you keep your independence and your health intact.