

Age-Related Falls Can Be Prevented!

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Falls are the leading cause of injury among adults aged 65 years and older in the United States, and can result in severe injuries such as hip fractures and head traumas. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), "In the next 17 seconds, an older adult will be treated in a hospital emergency department for injuries relate to a fall. In the next 30 minutes, an older adult will die from injuries sustained in a fall (1)." In 2000, falls among older adults cost the U.S. health care system over \$19 billion, increasing to \$23.6 billion by 2005 (2).

Some seniors are healthier than others and are able to remain physically active, attending exercise classes or community programs multiple times a week. Other seniors remain inactive, some in fear because they fell once and are now afraid, they will fall again. The good news is that primary care physicians and physical therapists can work together to assess your risk for falls and develop a plan to help you become more independent and lessen your risk for falling. In one patient case, unsteady gait and knee pain made him a higher falls risk.

A home health care team that included a physical therapist, an occupational therapist, and a physical therapist assistant worked together addressing this patient's pain, standing balance, and mobility with the goal of returning him to his prior level of independence. After a few weeks of therapy, the patient could access the community room from his apartment, walking about 60 feet independently without an assistive device, and 300 feet with a roller walker. His knee pain is well controlled with better medication management. A mobility routine (including exercises and a method for moving from sitting to standing positions), and the use of cold packs as prescribed by the physical therapist.

While there are many risk factors for falls, age-related changes in your body are the most common cause. For example, one common age-related change is decreased foot sensation; this can make it difficult to detect uneven surfaces, leading to instability. In addition, the circulatory system may respond less effectively to changes in position, such as transitioning from sitting to standing. Dizziness may occur due to inadequate flow to the brain.

Vision changes also occur with age and can cause limitations in depth perception. Regular check-ups with your eye doctor can make sure any changes in vision are corrected. Environmental risk factors include: loose carpets electrical cords, cluttered traffic areas, and poor lighting. A part of any falls risk assessment should include both a balance test and observation of the patient's home environment. If it is applicable, a ramp or side rails may need to be added to the interior or exterior of the house. During winter it is critical to keep walkways clear of ice and snow, and to remember to wear proper shoes.

Three quick tips to remember:

Exercise Regularly! It is important that the exercises focus on increasing leg strength and improving balance, as well as get more challenging over time. Tai Chi exercises are especially good!

Review Your Medications! Both prescriptions and over-the-counter medications may cause side effects such as dizziness or drowsiness.

Home Safety! Make homes safer by reducing tripping hazards, adding grab bars, adding stair railings, and improving lighting.

Part of this article was reproduced from a Monroe County Medicaid Presentation

Sources:

- (1) "Falls Among Older Adults: An Overview." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <http://www.cdc.gov/HomeandRecreationalSafety/Falls/adultfalls.html/>
- (2) "Cost of Fall Injuries in Older Persons in the United States, 2005." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <http://www.cdc.gov/HomeandRecreationalSafety/Falls/data/cost-estimates.html>