



Keeping Falls Out of Your Life

Foolproof Fall-proofing By **Dr. Thomas Cavalieri**

When a colleague's 82-year-old mother fell, it was an obvious shock, but he realizes it could have been much worse. "She was living alone but she didn't seem feeble or weak," he said. "We're still not sure what happened that night, whether she tripped over something when she got up or if her medications caused her to lose her balance."

His mother was luckier than most. Although she required a brief hospitalization, her injuries were limited to bruises and muscle soreness. Many other older adults aren't nearly so lucky. In fact, each year, more than one-third of adults who are 65 years or older experiences a fall. That's about 12 million individuals, which is roughly equal to the entire population of Pennsylvania. Between 20 and 30 percent of those who fall suffer moderate to severe injuries – including fractures and head trauma – that can limit their ability to get around or to live independently. Each year, more than 14,000 older adults died from injuries sustained in a fall.

Anyone at any age can fall, but as we grow older, both the likelihood of a fall and the chance that the fall will cause some sort of injury increase. Falling isn't an inevitable part of aging, but if you want to keep yourself safe from an injury-causing fall, you need to take some proactive steps.

One of the first steps is to literally take some steps. For older individuals, exercise is a critical component of successful aging. Muscle mass naturally declines with age and the large muscles in the lower body play a significant role in maintaining balance and our ability to "catch yourself" after a misstep or after being bumped off stride. If you're not already exercising regularly, ask your doctor to recommend an appropriate program. Many centers offer exercise classes tailored to older individuals' needs and abilities. Low impact programs like tai chi are especially good for simultaneously improving strength and balance.

Medications taken to help control chronic medical conditions can cause side effects, such as dizziness or drowsiness, that could lead to a fall. Ask your physician or pharmacist review all the prescription and non-prescription medications you take. If any cause these side effects, your physician may be able to recommend an alternative.

Changing position suddenly can cause a drop in blood pressure, causing some individuals to lose their balance. To avoid this, learn to change positions slowly. Instead of

jumping right out of bed in the morning, sit on the side of the bed before standing up. When rising from a sitting position, do so slowly and take a moment to be sure of your balance before beginning to walk.

The eyes and ears also play important roles in preventing falls. Eyes constantly relay information to the brain regarding the location of other objects in the environment. As the head moves, fluid shifts inside the canals of the inner ear, alerting the brain to the movement, which helps the eyes to keep objects in focus when the body is moving. Annual checkups for age-related vision problems like glaucoma, cataracts and macular degeneration, along with prompt medical attention to any pain or difficulties with the ears are important steps toward falls prevention.

That covers some of the medical causes of falling, but what about your physical environment? The key areas here are clothing, clutter, light and support.

Make certain that pants, skirts and robes are hemmed short enough to avoid a tripping hazard. Always wear sturdy, low-heeled shoes or sneakers that provide good support. Even when inside the home, avoid walking around in socks, slippers or any open heeled footwear.

Keep the floors and hallways free of loose clothing, shoes, boxes or reading material. Make sure the edges of carpets are secure and remove small throw rugs. Don't allow bedcovers to extend onto the floor and re-route electrical cords along baseboards and away from any open floor areas and hallways. Keep eyeglasses someplace at night where you can reach them without getting out of bed. Place frequently used kitchen and bath items within easy reach rather than on low or high shelves.

Older eyes don't adapt well to changes in light and dark, so keep rooms and stairways well lit and use night lights in bedrooms, bath and hallways. The path from the bed to the bathroom is an important one and may require more than one night light for safe illumination. An elevated toilet seat, non-skid bath mats and a bath chair can all help in the bathroom, one of the most dangerous rooms in the house for falls. Don't use the towel bar for support. Instead, have grab bars professionally installed near the toilet and in the shower.

Falls are a serious concern for older adults. Because it only takes a momentary slip to cause injuries that could affect your life for months, take some time to make sure your health and your house are "fall-proof."