

PREVENTING FALLS IN THE ELDERLY

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INTRODUCTION

About 1 out of every 3 Americans aged 65 and over will fall this year, resulting in 1.6 million ER visits, and over 20 billion dollars in medical costs. Over 11,000 elderly persons will die from a fall and 388,000 more will be hospitalized. Even if an elderly person gets through a fall without a loss of function from a major hip or head injury, the psychological impact of the fear of falling again can cause an otherwise active elderly person to be scared to leave their home. Many of these falls can be prevented with awareness, simple changes around the home, and regular visits to a primary care doctor.

CAUSES OF FALLS AND HOW TO PREVENT THEM

1. Simple Missed Step

People can fall from simply missing a step. These are the common accidents that affect people of all age groups. In younger persons quick reflexes, a good sense of balance, and strong muscles can catch persons in the miss step before they fall all the way to ground. The elderly can help strengthen their reflexes, balance, and muscles with regular exercise. Some medications can cause problems with balance so patients should always ask their doctor about medication side effects and take medication only as prescribed. If you start to notice that your balance is not as good as it used to be or your legs feel weak, then you should talk to your doctor about it soon so it can be treated before a fall occurs.

2. Tripping

Everybody has tripped and fallen at some point in their life. Usually the victim will look back and say “Who left that in the middle of the path? It was just waiting for someone to come and trip on it!” Younger people avoid tripping on things by seeing them and avoiding them, or remembering where obstacles are and going around them. Elderly people can have vision and memory problems that make them more prone to tripping. One simple way to prevent falls from tripping is to take the obstacles out of the path. Fix any broken sidewalks on your property or carpet bubbles in your home. Remove any throw rugs on the floor. Even though they “add color to a room”, they can be a deadly fall waiting to happen. Make sure commonly used paths are clear of clutter and well lit. This especially applies to the path between the bed and the toilet. Add nightlights if needed. If you notice that you are getting up at night more to use the toilet, then you should talk to your doctor about medicines to help sleep through the night. Also elderly persons should have regular eye exams and should see their doctor if they begin to have memory problems.

3. Lightheadedness/Blacking Out

Blacking Out or Syncope can cause persons to fall. People may get up too quickly, feel dizzy or lightheaded, and then lose consciousness and fall. Syncope is a sign that the brain is not getting enough oxygen or nutrients, a sign of a deeper problem. If you notice that you are blacking out or feeling lightheaded, then you should get to your doctor soon to help find the cause! The doctor may test the heart, blood, or brain or may adjust medications to help treat the syncope. Also, many medications can cause lightheadedness, so you should ask your doctor if this is a side effect of any new medications, especially medication for blood pressure.

OTHER TIPS

If you have a chronic medical condition that impairs your balance, strength, reflexes, or vision, you may need some extra help in preventing falls. Talk to your doctor about functional aides such as a cane, walker, bedside commode, or helper animal. Elderly persons can also ask a medical professional to do a fall risk assessment of the home to identify potential hazards and give advice on how to fix them. If you are not prone to falls but have osteoporosis or any other medical condition that increases the risk of a hip fracture, you should consider wearing a hip-protecting garment under the clothing. Also always wear a helmet and other protective safety equipment when participating in an activity where a fall is likely. Falls can be prevented with your awareness, these simple tips, and regular visits to your doctor.

Resources:

www.familydoctor.org/seniors.xml

www.cdc.gov/aging