



## Peak Physical Therapy and Wellness News . . .

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#### **Falls in the Older Adult Population: Risk Factors and Prevention Strategies**

**January 22, 2014, Norwell MA,** Older adults, particularly those over the age of 65, are increasingly at risk of falling, with most falls occurring within the home. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in three adults over the age of 65 will suffer a fall, and more seriously, falls are the leading cause of both fatal and nonfatal injuries in the older population. Adults who fall are more at risk of suffering a traumatic brain injury, laceration, or fracture, particularly of the hip. In fact, the CDC reports that 95% of hip fractures in the elderly population are caused by falls. There are many reasons why older adults have a greater fall risk, including muscle weakness, poor balance, vision problems, medication issues, chronic disease, improper footwear, and an unsafe home environment. Fortunately, there are several practical ways to prevent falls and reduce the risk of devastating injury.

One of the major risk factors associated with falls in the elderly is a complicated medical history. Those suffering from neurological diseases or conditions such as unstable blood pressure, osteoporosis, and diabetes often have a greater risk of falling and subsequent injury. Neurological conditions such as Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, and stroke often result in muscle weakness and balance deficits, thus increasing the likelihood of suffering a fall. Postural hypotension is another common issue facing older adults. When standing from a sitting or supine position, blood pressure can drop dramatically causing dizziness or lightheadedness. When the person does not sit and allow enough time for the blood pressure to stabilize, he or she may fall due to feelings of dizziness and unsteadiness. Those diagnosed with diabetes, specifically those with peripheral neuropathy, or numbness in the feet, are also at an increased risk for falling. When sensation in the feet is compromised, it becomes difficult to feel where you are stepping and balance can easily be lost. In addition, visual disturbances due to cataracts or glaucoma result in decreased visual input to the brain necessary for remaining balanced. Another factor associated with fall risk is use of prescription medications. According to the National Institutes of Health, people taking four or more prescription medications have an increased risk of falling. It is important that those with a health condition, chronic illness, and those with multiple prescriptions consult with their doctor to address symptoms, review medication interactions and side effects, assess for proper glasses, and refer for further care with the next appropriate practitioner such as a physical therapist, occupational therapist, or optometrist.

Other factors associated with falling include wearing poor footwear and living in a potentially hazardous environment. It is essential to wear shoes that are properly fitting with nonskid soles

to improve stability. Those who wear backless shoes or slippers with poor soles have an increased risk of injury. Some common hazards in the home environment include loose throw rugs, lack of grab bars near the toilet and shower, and poor lighting. Fortunately, these home factors are simple to modify. It is relatively easy to install grab bars in the tub or shower and next to the toilet. A raised toilet seat may also be used to decrease difficulty with rising from the toilet. Adding nonslip mats to the tub or shower also help improve stability in a notoriously slippery environment. For those especially fearful of standing in the shower, a shower chair can be helpful. In other parts of the home, it is important to make sure that rugs are securely fastened down, rails are available on the stairways, clutter is removed from the floor and stairs, and electrical cords are away from walking areas. Adequate lighting in the home is one of the easiest changes to make and is also essential to decreasing fall risk. It is imperative to make sure that the home is well-lit so furniture, rugs, and other potential dangers are easily seen and avoided. A physical or occupational therapist can assist in evaluating the home environment and offering suggestions to make the home safer.

Much of the elderly population is at risk of falling due to a decrease in lower extremity strength, reaction time, and fear of falling. Those with a strong fear of falling often reduce their activity level, causing decreased muscle strength, flexibility, and endurance. In addition, reflexes and balance reactions slow down with normal aging which can make it more difficult to catch yourself if you lose your footing. These deficits in balance, strength, flexibility, and endurance can be improved with a comprehensive exercise program. Physical therapists are especially helpful in addressing this aspect of fall prevention. An exercise program focused on building lower extremity strength, core stability, and muscular endurance can greatly reduce the risk of falling. Physical therapists can review medications and health history in addition to assessing balance, gait, and strength, making them extremely beneficial to someone fearful of falling. The physical therapist will then design a custom program for each specific individual to address every modifiable risk factor while monitoring progress and safety as the program is carried out. Those particularly fearful of falling and interested in improving their balance and stability should consult with a physical therapist to begin the process towards reducing devastating fall injuries.

Falls are a serious issue for the elderly population. While there are many factors that contribute to the increased risk of falling, there are also many ways to address them and prevent injury. Consulting with a physician or physical therapist can be most beneficial when attempting to prevent fall injury. These professionals can assist in reviewing medications, health history, and examining for physical conditions that result in reduced strength and balance. Suffering a fall can result in severe, disabling injury, loss of mobility and independence, and in some cases even death. Taking the aforementioned steps to decrease fall risk are essential to maintaining health and well-being throughout the later stages of life.

Statistics provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

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