

September is Healthy Aging Month

Falls Among Adults 65+

A fall can change your life. If you're elderly, it can lead to disability and a loss of independence. If your bones are fragile from osteoporosis, you could break a bone, often a hip. (1) Fall-related fractures occur most often in the person's hip, pelvis, spine, arm, hand or ankle. (2)

More than 1 in 3 people age 65 years or older fall each year and the risk increases dramatically with age. Among older adults, falls are the number one cause of fractures, hospital admissions for trauma, loss of independence, disability and injury deaths. (2) In 2007, 29,000 Angelenos aged 65 and older were hospitalized, and 400 died from fall-related injuries. (3)

Women are 46% more likely than men to have a nonfatal fall injury and women sustain 75% of all hip fractures. (4) Only half of older adults hospitalized for a broken hip can return home or live on their own after the injury. (2)

The fear of falling increases with age even among those who have never experienced a fall. Consequently, it may lead older adults to avoid activities such as walking, shopping or taking part in social activities. (4)

COST

The impact of fall-related morbidity and mortality will increase as the number of older adults continues to grow.(3) In 2000, the total costs of treating fall-related injuries among older adults exceeded \$19 billion in the U.S; by 2020, these numbers are expected to climb to \$59 billion, largely as a consequence of the number of aging baby boomers who will turn 65+ years beginning in 2011. (4)

CAUSES

Aging alone does not make people fall. Falls are often linked to a person's physical condition or medical issues such as a chronic disease. Muscle weakness, especially in the legs, is one of the most important risk factors. Diabetes, heart disease, arthritis, dementia and Alzheimer's disease affect balance as do problems with circulation, thyroid or nervous systems. Alcohol and certain medications can cause dizziness and thereby may disturb balance and cause a fall. (2)

Other causes include:

- Safety hazards in the person's home or community environment
- Poor balance
- Lack of exercise
- Blood pressure that drops significantly after lying down or sitting. This condition might result from dehydration or certain medications.
- Feet issues: painful feet and wearing unsafe footwear such as backless shoes or slippers, high heel shoes or shoes with smooth leather soles
- Sensory problems and eyesight issues: Lack of awareness pertaining to the environment. For instance: dark to light adjustment, depth perception, cataracts and glaucoma
- Confusion: Waking up in an unfamiliar environment
- Anxiety

Falls should be seen to by a physician in case there is a modifiable underlying issue.

PREVENTION

Falls are a public health problem that is largely preventable.(4) There are several steps a person can take to reduce falls. These include: staying active, getting regular eye and physical exams, getting rid of tripping hazards in the home such as loose rugs, wearing nonskid shoes, and taking vitamin supplements such as calcium and vitamin D. (1)

Other preventive measures include:

- Wearing corrective eyewear (bifocals, multifocal glasses) as prescribed
- Use of a walking aid
- Adding handrails to stairs and hallways
- Adequate lighting in dark areas
- Getting physical therapy
- Balance exercises such as Tai Chi

In case of a fall, easy access to a telephone and having a personal emergency response system such as a medical alert necklace/bracelet can make a difference in receiving appropriate, timely assistance.

For healthy aging, it is important to make sure we are 'fall-safe' by taking precautions, eating healthy foods, and staying physically active.

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1. <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/falls.html>
 2. <http://nihseniorhealth.gov/falls/aboutfalls/02.html>
 3. Ponce et al. Preventing Falls Among Adults Aged 65 Years and Older. *Rx for Prescription*. August 2010;1(7):1-6
 4. <http://www.cdc.gov/homeandrecreationalafety/falls/adultsfalls.html>