

5 Steps For Preventing Falls

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Every year, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in four Americans aged 65 and over, falls. Unfortunately, one tumble or misstep might lead to an emergency room visit where, sadly, every 19 minutes an older adult dies from their injuries.

“As we age, our senses change,” said Stacy Alt, physical therapist at Putnam County HomeCare & Hospice in Ottawa, Ohio. “We may not see as well as we used to and may not see the edge of a step or the change in surfaces or terrain. Our hearing changes and we may not hear someone warning that something is in our way. Also, medications or illnesses can make someone dizzy or drowsy which leads them to fall.”

The statistics may be scary, but the good news is that most falls are preventable. September is National Falls Prevention Month and is designed to spread this important public health message. Here are five things that your loved one can do to reduce their chances of a stumble:

Exercise

Just a little bit of movement each day can reduce the chances of falling. “In therapy, we test people on their upper and lower body strength and if they do not have good strength in their legs and in their core, they are going to be more at risk for falls and losing their balance,” said Alt.

Alt also develops individualized exercise programs that patients can use at home. “As we get older, we tend to sit more and move less and exercise keeps up strength. Some people can do exercises in a chair. Some people can go for a walk outside,” she said. It is different for everyone and we develop home exercise programs that are specific to each patient.

Talk it out

For some people, admitting they fell can be a little embarrassing, while others might keep their stumbles a secret for more personal reasons. “One of the biggest reasons that people are afraid to tell their family or healthcare providers that they fell is because they are afraid they won't be able to stay in their own home,” said Alt. “But if the healthcare provider doesn't know that you're falling, they won't address it or further investigate what's causing the falls. Once you have one fall, it puts you at risk for falling again.”

Review medications

You might not realize that the medication your loved one is taking can be contributing to their falls. The Centers for Disease Control states that some prescription drugs, over-the-counter medications, and herbal supplements can cause dizziness, sedation, confusion, blurred vision, or orthostatic hypotension (low blood pressure when you get up after

sitting or lying down). “A doctor or pharmacist can look to see if any medications they are taking are interacting with each other,” said Alt.

Check vision and hearing

When was the last time that your parents or grandparents had their hearing and vision checked? “If they are not seeing things well enough, can’t see changes in terrain or the different surfaces on the floor, or where a step ends or starts, they might need to have their vision checked,” said Alt. “Ears also have a lot to do with balance. There are inner ear problems that cause vertigo. Hearing also affects communication so if they can’t hear someone they can’t follow through with the instructions. It might be time to get their hearing and hearing aids checked.”

Home safety

As part of patient evaluations, Alt provides home safety assessments. “When we go to a patient’s home for an assessment, we have the patient move about the home, whether it’s in a wheelchair or walking,” said Alt. “We want to see whether they could be tripping on a rug or if they need more bathroom equipment for help with bathing or showering.”

That includes grab bars and raised toilet seats to assist people in the bathroom. “We also suggest moving hard to reach items that are used on a regular basis, because not having to reach up can reduce their risk for falls. It’s about making their environment safe and functional for them.”

If Alt sees safety concerns in the home, such as seeing the patient is having difficulty getting into the shower or tub, they also might request occupational therapy. Occupational therapy addresses activities of daily living such as bathing, dressing, laundry, and meal preparation, and can work with patients to increase independence and improve safety in the home.

A thorough medical evaluation and a home assessment can reduce the chances of falling, keeping you or your loved one safe. For more information, contact Putnam County

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