

Falls Are The Primary Cause of Accidental Death In Older Adults: Let's Prevent Them

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Overview—Falls are the *most common* life-threatening hazard to the health status and independence of adults over the age of 65. In the US, one of every three persons living in the community over age 65 falls each year with the incidence of falls increasing to 50% in those over 80 years of age. Two-thirds of adults who fall will fall again within six months.

In the same age group, falls are the leading cause of injury deaths and can result in head and soft tissue trauma and fractures. Among those adults who fracture a hip, more than 75% are women. Over half of adults hospitalized for hip fracture cannot return home and 25% never live independently again.

In addition to physical injury and nursing home placement, the fear of repeated falls often restricts travel, shopping, attending church and social functions, resulting in social isolation and depression. Elders even avoid essential activities in the home including mobility, bathing and meal preparation.

Causes—Falls are not a normal part of the aging process. Failing to recognize this fact diminishes efforts by family caregivers to prevent them. Many of the causes of falls can be prevented or reduced by addressing these six key risk factors:

- ◆ **Osteoporosis**—As adults age, their bones become more porous and less resistant to stress. This condition, more common among women, is caused by hormonal changes, calcium and vitamin D deficiencies, and decreased physical activity.
- ◆ **Lack of Physical Activity**—The ability to maintain a stable upright position, ambulate and rise from a chair with balance is a complex process requiring muscle tone, strength and flexibility.
- ◆ **Impaired Vision**—Vision plays an extremely important role in balance and the ability to avoid obstacles. Declining visual ability impairs depth perception, adaptation to light and dark, and the ability to perceive object contrast and spatial detail.
- ◆ **Poly-Pharmacia**—The use of four or more drugs or beginning a new drug, side-effects of medications and the following types of drugs greatly increases the risk of falling: anti-depressants, sedatives, anti-hypertensives and cardiac meds, and alcohol consumption.
- ◆ **Environmental Hazards**—Approximately 35% of all falls involve environmental hazards in the home. These hazards include clutter, throw rugs, poor lighting, unsafe stairways, electrical cords, inappropriate furniture, slippery surfaces and the lack of bathroom grab bars and safety mats in the tub.
- ◆ **Medical Conditions**—Falls can be a signal of poor health and declining function. 50% of falls are caused by medical conditions including arthritis, stroke, dementia, heart disease, peripheral neuropathy, Parkinson's syndrome, hypotension and foot disorders.

What You Can Do—When you're with your care recipient, look for the above risk factors. The occurrence of a fall should raise a red flag to initiate further evaluation. Here are three actions you can take to reduce or eliminate your own or a loved one's risk of injury and death:

- ◆ Have a *thorough* medical and ophthalmologic examination;
- ◆ Engage in daily weight-bearing and flexibility exercises;
- ◆ Conduct a walk-through of the home to identify safety problems, and
- ◆ Make sure to take the correct amounts of calcium and vitamin D.

Visit our website resource center at www.GriswoldSpecialCare.com for a tool you can use to evaluate the home for safety and a brochure that can help you prevent falls in the home.

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