

Simple Steps to Reduce Fall Risks



Every year, one in three adults over age 64 falls. Thousands of older adults die from fall injuries every year and about two million are treated for nonfatal fall injuries in emergency departments. But simple home modifications and exercises that improve strength and balance can help reduce the risk of falling.

“Half of falls occur in a person’s home. Falls are the main reason older people go to emergency departments,” says Steve Albert, PhD, co-director of the University of Pittsburgh Prevention Research Center (PRC).

The PRC is part of a nationwide network of 37 academic and community research partners funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to find ways to keep people healthy. Several PRCs conduct research on ways to help older adults avoid falling. Dr. Albert is comparing the effectiveness of two fall-prevention programs, and health agencies will use findings in choosing which program to offer.

“Most falls involve changing location, such as while walking or moving from a bed or chair,” says Dr. Albert. “Sometimes, falls happen when someone carries laundry down stairs without a railing.”

“Stairs are a challenge for people with balance problems,” says Elizabeth Phelan, MD, a University of Washington PRC researcher who runs a fall-prevention clinic in Seattle. Because evidence shows that people can reduce their fall risk by improving balance and strength, Dr. Phelan refers many patients to EnhanceFitness, an exercise class developed by the Washington PRC. Proven to improve balance and strength, EnhanceFitness is offered at 450 sites nationwide.

Older adults who have already experienced a fall are at risk for more falls, Dr. Phelan says. She is researching the feasibility of emergency medical technicians’ providing fall-prevention information when responding to fall-related 911 calls. Acting on such information may reduce callers’ risk of future falls.

Dr. Phelan says the psychological consequences of falls should not be underestimated. “People who fall may develop a fear of

falling,” she says. “And because of that they may start limiting their activity, and that leads to what I call a vicious cycle or a downward spiral of worsening muscle weakness and an increased propensity for falls.”

“A lot of older people don’t recognize that falls can, in a flash, change their independent lifestyle,” says Dr. Phelan. “Many older adults can no longer live on their own if they have suffered serious fall-related injuries.”

People should address fall hazards when they’re young so they can live at home as long as possible—a concept called “aging in place,” says Marcia Ory, PhD, a Texas A&M Health Science Center PRC researcher.

Dr. Ory also works with the Healthy Aging Research Network (HAN), funded by the CDC’s Healthy Aging Program. The HAN is a group of PRCs that focus on developing, testing, and disseminating effective strategies for keeping older adults healthy and independent. A booklet that describes the network’s structure and mission as well as presents selected accomplishments is available at <http://www.cdc.gov/prc/program-material/booklets.htm>. “The mantra for the HAN is ‘always plan for the future’” Dr. Ory says.

Some older adults associate installation of safety equipment, such as grab rails in the bathroom, with “becoming frail and dependent” says Dr. Ory. “But if the safety equipment had already been there, they might not think about it as a stigma,” she says.

Dr. Ory studies how to implement effective fall-prevention programs and policies. “Many states offer fall-prevention screening, referrals, and programs, but more offerings are needed,” she says. “Older adults and their caregivers should ask their health care providers and public health agencies about these programs.”

A compendium of evidence-based programs to prevent older adult falls can be found at www.cdc.gov/HomeandRecreationalSafety/Falls/compendium.html.

For more information about CDC’s Prevention Research Centers Program, visit www.cdc.gov/prc.

Fall-Prevention Tips

- ✓ Improve balance and strength with exercise programs like Tai Chi, a Matter of Balance, or EnhanceFitness
- ✓ Reduce tripping hazards—keep cords, shoes, papers, plants, and boxes out of walkways
- ✓ Add grab bars in and beside the tub/shower and next to the toilet
- ✓ Use a nonslip mat or appliques in the tub/shower
- ✓ Install railings on both sides of stairways
- ✓ Improve lighting and use nightlights
- ✓ Avoid throw rugs or use nonskid mats or tape
- ✓ Have eyes checked by an eye doctor at least once a year
- ✓ Ask doctor or pharmacist to review medications to identify those that may cause dizziness or drowsiness