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"treating the cause of your problem, not just the symptoms"

Preventing Falls Among Older Adults

Perhaps you know someone who's been injured, disabled or even killed by a fall. Or maybe you've taken a spill yourself and are afraid the next one could be worse. As we age, time takes its toll on the bodily systems that keep us balanced and standing upright. For example, you may not see or hear as well, which can affect your coordination. Nerves that carry information from your brain to your muscles may fray and deteriorate, slowing your reaction time and making it more difficult to move away from oncoming pedestrians or adjust to icy patches on a sidewalk. Normal declines in muscle strength and joint flexibility can hinder your ability to stand, walk and rise from chairs.

In 2003, more than 1.8 million seniors were treated in hospital emergency rooms for fall-related injuries and of those treated, more than 421,000 were hospitalized. You needn't let the fear of falling rule your life, however, as many falls and fall-related injuries are preventable. Through scientific studies, researchers have identified a number of modifiable risk factors that increase the likelihood of a fall, including medication side effects, loss of limb sensation, poor eyesight, tripping hazards within the home, and lack of physical activity.

The following are a few simple tips to prevent falls from occurring:

- Perform a home safety check. At least one-third of all falls involves hazards within the home. Most commonly, people trip over objects on the floor. See the Home Safety Checklist at the end of the article and work with a family member or health care provider to evaluate your home for potential hazards and minimize your risk of injury.
- Begin a regular exercise program. Consider a general exercise program that includes activities such as walking or water workouts. Exercise reduces your risk of falls by improving your strength, balance, coordination and flexibility. For example, patients who participated in a 12-week tai chi program 3 times a week significantly increased knee and ankle muscle strength and improved flexibility and mobility compared with a group that did not participate in the exercise program. Tai chi participants were almost twice less likely to experience a fall.
- Review your medications with your pharmacist or health care provider. Your risk of falling may increase if you take certain prescription medications to treat age-related

medical conditions. Many medications have side effects that can affect your brain function and lead to dizziness or lightheadedness. Taking multiple medications magnifies the risk, as does combining prescription drugs with alcohol, over-the-counter allergy or sleeping medications, painkillers, or cough suppressants. Ask your prescribing physician to review the medications you currently take and suggest ways to reduce your chances of falling by using the lowest effective dosage.

- Have your vision checked. Reduced vision is strongly related to an increased risk of falls. Age-related vision diseases, including cataracts and glaucoma, can alter your depth perception, visual acuity and susceptibility to glare. These limitations hinder your ability to move safely. It is important to have regular check-ups with your ophthalmologist.
- Prevent the effects of osteoporosis. Osteoporosis is a condition that makes your bones less resistant to stress and more likely to fracture. Caused by hormonal changes, calcium and vitamin D deficiencies, and a decrease in physical activity, osteoporosis is a chief cause of fractures in older adults, especially among women. To help limit the effects of osteoporosis, be sure to eat or drink sufficient calcium. Calcium-rich foods include milk, yogurt, cheese, fish and shellfish, selected vegetables such as broccoli, soybeans, collards and turnip greens, tofu and almonds. In addition, it is important to consume sufficient amounts of vitamin D to enhance the absorption of calcium into the bloodstream.

Falls don't have to be a part of getting older. You have the power to stay securely on your feet. A physical activity program, lifestyle changes, and home improvements may further reduce your risk. As well, see your Doctor of Chiropractic as soon as possible if you suffer a fall or injury. Chiropractic care may reduce the longterm effects of these injuries and reduce pain while healing.

Home Safety Checklist

All living spaces

- Remove throw rugs
- Secure carpet edges
- Remove low furniture & objects on the floor
- Reduce clutter
- Remove cords and wires on the floor
- Check adequate lighting at night (especially along the pathway to the bathroom)
- Secure carpet or treads on stairs
- Install handrails on staircases
- Eliminate chairs that are too low to sit in and get out of easily
- Do not wax your floors—or use nonskid wax
- Ensure that the telephone can be reached from the floor

Bathrooms

- Install grab bars in the bathtub/shower and by the toilet
- Use rubber mats in the bathtub/shower.
- Take up floor mats when you aren't using the bathtub/shower to avoid tripping over them

- Install a raised toilet seat

Outdoors

- Repair cracked sidewalks
- Install handrails on stairs and steps
- Trim shrubbery along the pathway to the home
- Install adequate lighting by doorways and along walkways leading to doors