

# FALLS

## FACTS

- Falls are the leading cause of injury and injury death in the United States for the elderly.
- One out of four older adults fall each year.
- Preventing falls reduces hospitalizations and subsequent medical complications.

## CAUSES OF FALLS

- Decline in physical fitness
  - Muscle mass and strength decline 30-50% between the ages of 30 and 80.
  - Rate of decline after the age of 50 is approximately 12-14% per decade.
- Medications
  - Benzodiazapines
  - Sedatives
  - Antipsychotics
  - Narcotic analgesics
  - Sedating antihistamines
  - Muscle relaxants
  - Drugs that lower blood sugar or blood pressure
- Chronic diseases
  - Impaired vision
  - Stroke
  - Chronic kidney disease
  - Diabetes
  - Orthostatic hypotension
- Surgery

- Orthopedic procedures
- Environmental hazards
  - Area rugs
  - Electrical cords
- Behavioral hazards
  - Irritability
  - Impulsiveness

## UNIQUE CAUSES OF FALLS

- Frontal gait apraxia with Alzheimer's Disease, Frontotemporal Dementia or Normal Pressure Hydrocephalus
  - Slow short strides
  - Feet barely clear the ground when stepping
  - Arms do not swing naturally when walking
  - Difficulty walking in a straight line
  - Falling backward
- Strokes
  - Weakness and loss of balance
- Parkinson's
  - Flexed forward at the hips
  - Shuffling of feet
  - Short strides
  - Arm tremor may increase when walking
  - Classically fall backward
- Peripheral neuropathy
  - Numbness in the feet which can progress to the ankles, shins, and knees
  - Uncoordinated gait
  - Unstable posture or feeling of imbalance

- May hear a foot slap when walking
- May develop foot deformities
- Spinal stenosis
  - A narrowed spinal canal squeezes nerves to the legs
  - Weakness in legs
  - Poor balance
  - Wide-based gait
- Vertigo
  - A sense of spinning or movement in the head
  - Poor balance

## FALLS PREVENTION

- Complete a home safety checklist.
  - Read the website document Home Safety Assessment Checklist for more information.
- Simplify the home setting by removing excess furnishings.
- Adjust position of furnishings to keep walkways clear.
- Provide adequate lighting especially at night.
- Remove area rugs. If area rugs are needed, choose ones with non-skid padding.
- Determine if handrails on stairways are present and secure and install or replace as needed.
- Ensure chairs have armrests to assist with standing from a seated position.
- Consider installing grab bars in the shower and near the sink and commode.
- Place brightly colored tape on stair edges.
- Place a gate across the top of the stairs if balance and judgement are problematic.
- Position electrical items so that the cord does not pass through a walking area. Consider tacking cords to baseboards.

- Pets are a tripping hazard. Contain pets at night. Have a pet wear a collar with bells to know where the pet is in the home.
- Clean up spills when they happen.
- Wear flat, thin soled, fabric topped shoes.
- Do not drop a person off at a curb side if there is a risk of falls. Park the car, assist the person out of the car, and walk beside to reduce the chance of falling.
- Ask the provider about a handicap parking placard.
- Get regular check-ups to evaluate eyesight, hearing, orthopedic limitations, and blood pressure when sitting and standing.
- Participate in exercises to preserve and improve strength.
- Avoid medications that increase the risk of falling.
- Avoid alcohol which can impair balance and alertness.
- Consider a fall alert system with GPS technology.
- Physical therapy may be ordered for help with improving gait and balance.
- Assistive devices such as a walking stick, cane or walker may be necessary.