

Slips and Falls Prevention

Falls are the leading cause of fatal and nonfatal injuries in people 65 and older in the United States. Falls can happen anytime and anyplace to people of any age, but most falls by people age 65 and older occur in the home during everyday activities. You can fall walking across a cluttered living room floor, in a slippery bathroom or while standing on a stool reaching into a cupboard. Falls account for a high percentage of fractures and disability in the elderly.

As you get older, falls are more likely. 1 in 4 people over the age of 65, who live at home, will fall during the next year. The number of falls and the severity resulting from falls increases as people age. That's because your reaction time slows. Your muscles and joints may also get stiffer, making them less flexible. Illness, medications, and vision changes can also affect your balance. A fall could leave you unable to live on your own. The most common serious injuries resulting from falls are head injuries, wrist fractures, spine fractures, and hip fractures. The direct cost of fall injuries for people age 65 and older is expected to rise by \$32.4 billion in 2020.

Falls Are Not Natural Occurrences

Falls in the elderly are a very common, costly, healthcare problem. However, 30-40% of falls can be prevented with balance training, exercise, proper nutrition, and knowing your limits.

How Balance Works

Your brain, muscles, and bones work together to maintain your body's balance and to keep you from falling, whether you're walking, rising from a chair, or climbing stairs. They also let you navigate sloping or uneven surfaces. Balance relies on three types of sensory information: Vision, Vestibular, and Somatosensory. When your sense of balance is in good working order, there are three elements of balance work together automatically with your musculoskeletal system to keep you mobile and to prevent falls. If one or all three of these systems are altered, your balance will also be altered.

Vision: Your vision plays a big role in keeping you balanced by allowing you to know where your body is in relation to objects around you.

Vestibular: Your vestibular system relays the position of your head and body in space to your brain. This allows you to tilt your head and stay balanced.

Somatosensory: Your somatosensory system tells you where your arms and legs are in space without looking at them. Independent of vision, this allows you to close your eyes and then wiggle your foot in any direction while still knowing which way your foot is pointed.

Balance is a Skill You Can Keep-Or Recapture

Balance is a skill that almost all of us can keep throughout our lives. Much of the deterioration in balance associated with age is simply due to not using this skill. Sometimes this happens because of change in lifestyle, most of us become more sedentary as we grow older, or it can happen due to fear of falling.

Working with a Physical Therapist can produce exceptional results in many cases by evaluating the cause of the falls. Even if some of your innate sense of balance has been diminished over time, Physical Therapists are experts at retraining your body to make the most of its capabilities.

Safety Tips to Prevent Falls

Most falls and injuries occur in the home. Many are preventable by recognizing the dangers and taking the necessary steps to minimize the risks of preventable falls from known home hazards. Here are some home safety tips.

FLOORS

- put nonskid pads under area rugs
- remove throw rugs
- replace worn floor coverings
- take away loose wires/cords
- keep floors and stairs free of clutter
- arrange furniture so there are clear pathways

STAIRS

- repair loose carpets/rugs or boards immediately
- put nonskid strips on the edges of uncarpeted stairs
- place brightly colored tape at the front edges of stairs to make more visible
- do not leave objects on the stairs
- install full-length handrails on both sides of the stairway
- provide enough light to see clearly each step, the top, and bottom landings

BATHROOMS

- install grab bars in the tub or shower
- apply nonskid strips or put a nonskid rubber mat in the tub or shower

- sit on a bath chair to bathe and use a hand held shower head
- use bath mats with nonskid backing
- install grab bars in the toilet area and use a raised toilet seat

LIGHTING

- keep a flashlight in each room
- put a night light along the pathways you regularly use
- turn lights on if you get up in the dark

KITCHEN

- clean up any spills, dropped food, etc. from floors immediately
- use nonskid floor wax
- use step stools with an attached handrail

MISCELLANEOUS

- wear rubber soled low heeled shoes
- have a cordless phone that you bring with you everywhere
- stand up slowly from a bed or chair and stand for a moment before walking

Colorado Physical Therapy Institute, P.C. offers FREE Balance Screening the first Tuesday of every month. Please call 303-460-9129 for more details.