Take Control: Reduce your Risk of Falling

Introduction
Falls are the leading cause of death, injuries and disabilities in adults 65 and older. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2018), falls are responsible for the death of approximately 28,000 older adults each year. Falls reduce older adults’ independence and create a lasting fear for many persons. Today, falls have become a major health concern as a result of these statistics. Once a fall occurs, the chances of falling again more than doubles among older adults.

Risk Factors
Many individuals tend to focus only on environmental factors when considering older adults and falls, yet there are many factors that can lead to falls. Here are some major factors that will increase your risk of falling.

Biological Factors: Bodily Changes

Age: The risk of falling increases with age. Individuals over 80 are more likely to fall and to get injured.

Illnesses: Illnesses that can cause older adults to fall are:
- Stroke
- Parkinson’s disease
- Osteoporosis
- Bowel and bladder incontinence
- Other disabling conditions

Age-related changes: Here are some bodily (physiological) changes that occur as a result of aging:
- Gait (The way a person walks)
- Balance
- Vision: weakened depth perception (how a person perceives the distance of visual objects); contrast sensitivity (how you see different sizes of objects), and a decline in dark adaptation (eye reflex to dim light).

Behavioral Factors
Here are some behavioral changes that occur based on choices and actions.
- Trying to do what you could do when younger (inability to accept & recognize changes in the body)
- Refusal to use mobility aids when needed such as a cane, hand rail, grab bar, wheelchair, etc.
- Incorrect use of mobility aids
- Physical inactivity
- Intoxication
- Afraid of falling may lead to a sedentary lifestyle
- Poor or inadequate diet (lack of protein and calcium can lead to muscle loss and weak bones)
Lack of exercise can lead to muscle loss and weak bones

Unsuitable shoes or slippers: too large, slipper bottoms and high heels

Large heavy purse/handbag

Rushing (to bathroom or to answer phone)

Here are some behavioral changes based on medications:

- Side effects of certain medicines, including some antibiotics
- Multiple medication interactions
- Inability to adjust to prescriptions

Environmental Factors

Although most falls occur at home, here are some environmental factors in the home and in the community that could lead to falls:

- Clutter
- Poor lighting
- Narrow stairs
- Showers/tubs
- Loose rugs
- Lack of aids
- Electrical cords
- Pets
- Door sills uneven with floor
- No supportive features
- Substances or items on floors (water, oil, powder, uncooked beans, paper, pens, etc.)

Here are some helpful strategies to increase your awareness of falls and your ability to prevent falls:

- Obtain education and training on the factors.
- Exercise regularly (walking, yoga, balance training, etc.).
- Use assistive devices such as canes, crutches, reachers, and scooters properly.
- Modify the environment.
- Review or modify medications using doctor’s recommendations (fitting of glasses, correcting vision, checking prescriptions, identifying side effects, etc.)
- Apply multiple strategies.

Figure 2. Poor fitting shoes can cause elders to fall. iStock image by Toa55.

Figure 3. Use a cane to prevent falls. iStock image by michaeljung.
What you can do to Prevent Falls

- Attach bed rail on side of bed.
- Attach grab bars on wall in and near shower, tub and toilet.
- Attach rails on both sides of stairs (inside home and outside home).
- Attach a raised toilet seat (with or without arms or bars).
- Install a shower chair.
- Attach a handheld shower head.
- Use assistive devices as instructed.
- Always lock scooter before sitting on it.
- Train pets not to block you from walking. Locate your pet before moving.
- Keep portable phone with you at all times.

Reference