

Health Matters – September 2009

Just Do It, Don't Fall

When a baby learns to walk they fall all of the time and it is not a big deal. I distinctly remember falling in my forties while skiing and thinking, "I don't bounce like I used to; this hurts." Now I really don't like to fall, and it is my number one concern for my father. A fall could potentially take him out of his home and put him into a nursing home. In Minnesota, falls are the number one cause of traumatic deaths. In fact, Minnesota has the third highest rate of fall-related deaths in the nation.^{2, 1}

Hip fractures are not the only injury resulting from falls, but it is the most common injury related to falls. Unfortunately, the recovery from hip fractures can be difficult. The statistics are staggering. Twenty percent of people die within the first year of a hip fracture, and fifty percent never regain their previous level of function. Many are unable to live independently after the injury. One in four adults who lived independently before a hip fracture had to stay in the nursing home for at least a year following their injury.²

Where are these falls happening? You may be surprised to know that fifty-five percent of falls take place inside the home on level ground. What can you do to help prevent a fall?³

1. **Know your bone health.** Osteoporosis is a major cause of hip fractures. Peak bone mass occurs during the 20-35 year range. At age 35-50 we lose 1% per year. Osteoporosis affects more women than men. Fifty percent of women and nineteen percent of men have osteopenia in their 50's. Risk factors include increasing age, being Caucasian or Asian, having a small stature or low body weight, a family history of osteoporosis, and a lack of exercise. The good news is that there is help to reverse bone loss.^{5,6}
2. **Exercise is your fountain of youth.** Exercise is one of the most important things you can do to prevent osteoporosis and reduce your risk of falling. Exercise can improve your strength, balance, coordination and confidence. Find an exercise that you enjoy and will stay with. Do you need a partner to exercise with? Are you one who would go to a health club, or are you an at home exerciser? Boredom can sabotage an exercise program. Have various things you like to do or vary the exercise program in different seasons. Try to incorporate strengthening, aerobic, flexibility and balance exercises into your routine. Some examples include yoga, Thai Chi, riding bike, walking, and water aerobics. If your mobility is limited, begin with chair exercises. The saying "if you don't use it you lose it" is very true. No one is ever too old to start an exercise program. Much research has been done that shows individuals 80 years of age and older can increase their strength and improve their balance with exercise. If a person walks with an

- assistive device, they may even be able to move from a walker to a cane or from a cane to nothing.^{1,2}
3. **Make you home safer.** Remove things you can trip over and don't leave anything on your steps. Tape down area rugs to keep from catching the edge with your foot or to keep the rug from slipping out from under you. Keep frequently used items within easy reach to avoid using a stool. Install grab bars in the bathroom near the toilet and tub/shower, and use non-slip mats in the shower or bathtub floor. Secure handrails on steps and install a light on staircases. Avoid shoes without heels or shoes with narrow heels. Conduct a safety check of your home.³
 4. **Have your vision checked annually.** As you get older you need brighter light to see well. Increase the wattage of your light bulbs and use night lights.¹
 5. **Review your medications with your doctor, especially if you get a new prescription.** Be aware of medications that may make you dizzy. The average senior takes nine medications each day - six prescription medicines and three over-the-counter. Research shows that seniors who take more than four medications a day are at a higher risk for falls.^{1,2}

One of my father's favorite sayings is, "Life is grand if you don't weaken," so DON'T fall.

References:

1. www.learnnottofall.com
2. www.cdc.gov
3. www.mnsafetycouncil.org
4. Signs Your Bones Need Attention, Excerpt from Reversing Osteopenia - Part 1 From Harris H. McIlwain, M.D., and Debra Fulghum Bruce, Ph.D., with Laura McIlwain, for About.com
5. Men and Osteoporosis, with Sanford Baim, M.D., Rheumatologist, Columbia St. Mary's

Lori Mildon has been a physical therapist at Lakeview Hospital since 1991. She holds a Bachelor of Science degree in physical therapy from the University of North Dakota, and a doctorate in physical therapy from Boston University.