Falls: Preventative Measures, and What to Do When Falls Occur

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As people age, the risks of falling may increase. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), each year, one in every three adults age 65 and older falls.[1]

Luckily, as the CDC reports, falls are largely preventable. With the proper knowledge of what can be done to prevent falls, older adults can reduce their chances of falling.

In this guide, we will cover a number of issues that deal with falls, such as information regarding how we maintain our balance, how the fear of falling may actually increase the risk of falling, and what do to if you fall or see someone else fall.

I. Learning How We Maintain Balance May Help Prevent Falls Among the Elderly

According to an article published by the Wall Street Journal, scientists are currently conducting research as to how we maintain our balance and stability.[2]

Insights into the issue may help doctors better predict people's risk of falling, leading to improvements in prevention and rehabilitation strategies.

The news should come as a relief to the elderly and their family/caregivers. According to the CDC, falls are the number one cause of death and injury among people age 65 and older–in 2010 alone, more than two million older people went to an emergency room because of a fall.[3]

Here are some facts taken from the article to help you better understand the research being conducted.

The body has three main systems that help us stay balanced:

- The visual system, the proprioceptive system (which helps us sense our body parts), and the vestibular system (which focuses primarily on how the head moves).
- If at least two of these systems are impaired, people tend to have trouble with balance.
- As people age, the vestibular system becomes less sensitive and people begin to rely more on their vision, making it harder for the elderly to process information that allows them to correct their missteps.

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[1] http://www.cdc.gov/homeandrecreationalsafety/Falls/adultfalls.html
[2] http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303983904579093560173066446.html
[3] http://www.cdc.gov/homeandrecreationalsafety/Falls/adultfalls.html

Researchers are also measuring variations in step–based on stride and how we shift our weight–in order to see how such variations can affect our balance. What they've discovered is this:

- Greater variability in steps, typical among the elderly, could indicate a higher risk of falling.
- Along with greater variability in steps, researchers have also noticed that older individuals are more at risk from small variations in steps than younger people.

Researchers have also been studying how big of a role the brain plays in balance. What they discovered were neurons in a small region of the cerebellum that respond to the unexpected motion and alert the body to react. Because this is a relatively new discovery, more research needs to be conducted in order to better identify exactly what the brain does in such a situation.

When explaining why an accident occurs, older people often say they tripped or slipped. In order to pinpoint the exact cause(s), researchers placed video cameras throughout a long-term care facility to see what they could find. In the span of three years they recorded 227 falls from 130 individuals.

This is what they discovered:

- Tripping caused just 1 out of 5 of the incidents.
- Falls due to incorrect weight shifting, like leaning over too far, made up about 41% of the total.
- Other reasons included loss of support of an object (guard rail, cane, walker) or bumping into something.

II. Studies Show that Fear of Falling is a Risk to the Elderly

Falling has proven to be a very serious risk among the elderly.

With one out of three adults aged 65 and older falling each year–and falls accounting for the number one cause of death and injury among them–it's no surprise that many seniors have developed a fear of falling.

But what may come as a surprise to many is that the fear of falling may actually *increase* the risk of falling, along with other consequences affecting the mental and physical health of the elderly.

Here is what some studies have found regarding fear of falling:

1. Fear of falling leads to increases in social isolation

According to one study, "approximately 10% of older adults living independently in the community, including more than 5% of those who have never fallen, experience moderate to severe fear of falling." As a result, the study found that many seniors avoided multiple activities, leading an increase in social isolation.[4]

2. Fear of falling actually boosts the risk of falling

Another study in the British Medical Journal found that 43% (214) out of 500 seniors they surveyed reported one or more falls.[5] The researchers then split the sample into four groups based on the disparity between their actual and perceived risk. This is what they found:

- While the "anxious" group had a low risk of falling, the group perceived their risk as high. As a result, among 40% of this group had several falls over the year of the study. Researchers believed that this outlook was linked to an increased likelihood of depressive symptoms, neurotic personality traits and poor physical health.

- On the other hand, the "stoic" group had a high risk of falling but did not think they did. Yet, only one in three experienced one or more falls. What researchers found was that this outlook offered some protection against falling and was linked to a positive outlook on life, physical activity, and community participation.

Fear of falling, then, is more than just mental–it can actually influence the fall rate among the elderly.

3. Fear of falling puts seniors at risk for disability

As mentioned in the study above, the fear of falling can be linked to an increase in mental health problems, but beyond depression and anxiety, studies have shown an increased risk in disability, too.

In a study[6] taken among older adults with eye disease, researchers found that seniors who limited their activity due to fear of falling had greater comorbidity.[7] In turn, the study suggested that older adults should stay as mobile as safely possible to help prevent morbidity associated with a sedentary lifestyle, mobility disability and mortality.

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[4] http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/781175
[5] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-11024126
[6] http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2012/12/121211163543.htm
[7] Comorbidity: the presence of one or more disorders (or diseases) in addition to a primary disease or disorder, or the effect of such additional disorders or diseases. [Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comorbidity]

While the fear of falling is a very real and serious concern, keeping in mind the consequences and risk of such fears is equally as important.

III. What to Do If You Fall (or See Someone Else Fall)

The information given in the last two sections is meant to help prevent falls. While we've given you these facts in hopes of preventing the worst, there is still the possibility that you or a loved one could fall, which is why it is extremely important to know what to do in such a situation.

In the event that a fall does occur, the Public Health Agency of Canada has compiled scenarios and steps to be taken in each. For your convenience, these have been outlined below.[8]

Scenario 1: You have fallen, but believe you can get up

Before you attempt to get up, you should collect your thoughts and take a moment to check and see if you are injured.

If you believe you can get up, here is what the PHAC suggests:

- Lie on your side, bend the leg that is on top and lift yourself onto your elbows or hands.
- Pull yourself toward an armchair or other sturdy object, then kneel while placing both hands on the chair or object.
- Place your stronger leg in front, holding on to the chair or object.
- Stand up.
- Very carefully, turn and sit down.

Scenario 2: You have fallen, but believe you cannot get up.

If you feel any discomfort or believe you cannot get up, here is what the PHAC suggests:

- Call out for help if you think you can be heard.
- If you have an emergency call device or telephone at hand, use it.
- If you don't, try to slide yourself towards a telephone or a place where you will be heard.
- Make noise with your cane or another object to attract attention.
- Wait for help in the most comfortable position for you.
- If you can, place a pillow under your head and cover yourself with a piece of clothing or a blanket to stay warm.

[8] http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines/alt-formats/pdf/publications/public/injury-blessure/falls-chutes/falls-chutes-e.pdf

- Try to move your joints to ease circulation and prevent stiffness.

Scenario 3: You've witnessed a fall and the individual believes they cannot get up

When you have witnessed a fall, it's important that you assess the situation before helping. Do not try to get the person up immediately.

If the individual believes they cannot get up, here is what the PHAC suggests:

Call for help and administer first aid if you are able to do so. Help the person find a comfortable position and keep him or her warm using an item of clothing or blanket.

Scenario 4: You've witnessed a fall and the individual believes they can get up

Here is what the PHAC suggests:

- Bring a chair close by, help the person turn onto their side and bend the upper leg, and then help the person into a semi-seated position.
- Placing yourself behind the person and getting a firm grip on the hips, help the person to a kneeling position with both hands on the chair.
- Holding on to the chair, the person should then place the stronger leg in front. You may help by guiding his or her leg.
- With a firm grip on the hips, help the person to stand, then turn and sit on the chair.

A key thing to remember in all of these situations is to stay calm in order to prevent any more injury.

IV. Conclusion

Falling is a risk most often associated with aging, however, it is not inevitable like many people think. With proper care and understanding of what can be done, the risk of falling for the elderly can be reduced. At Encompass, we provide the knowledge and services that ensure the proper steps are being taken to reduce risks associated with aging. In turn, it is our hope to give you and your loved ones peace of mind while maintaining and increasing your quality of life as you age.