



Falls and Older Adults

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What is a fall?

A fall is when someone unintentionally goes to the ground. Tinetti, Speechley and Ginter (1988) defined a fall as “an event which results in a person coming to rest unintentionally on the ground or lower level, not as a result of an intrinsic event (such as a stroke) or overwhelming hazard.”

Who is likely to fall?

By 2030, one in five adults is projected to be over 65 years of age (U. S. Census Bureau, 2015). Anyone age 65 and older is considered an older adult. It has been reported that older adults fall at least once a year (Tromp et al., 2001).

Falls and injury, illness, and death

For most older adults, falls can result in injury. Injuries can include a sprained ankle, hip fracture and head injury. Falls can result in long term illness, including disability. Some falls require nursing home admission. Serious falls can result in death. You can prevent injury, illness and death by reducing falls risk.

Falls and quality of life

Falls can cause injuries that affect quality of life. Fear of falling can also affect quality of life. Fear of falling may make people feel less confident. When someone does not feel confident, they may limit physical activity and social interactions.

Falls are expensive

Health related costs due to falls are estimated to be around \$20 billion annually.

Direct medical costs

Direct medical costs are defined as “all costs due to resource use that are completely attributable to the use of a health care intervention or illness” (Kirch, 2008). Direct costs can include health care interventions, follow-up costs, medication, interventions in ambulatory, inpatient and nursing care.



Typical costs include:

- Emergency room visits
- X-ray and Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI)
- Orthopedic doctor visits
- Surgery
- Rehabilitation
- Long term care

Table 1. The cost of falling.

Cost	Non-fatal falls	Fatal falls
Total direct medical costs	\$19 billion*	\$0.2 billion*
Average cost of a fall-related injury per person	\$9,463.00**	\$25,487.00**

* (Stevens, Corso, Finkelstein & Miller, 2006)

** (Burns, Stevens & Lee, 2016)

What causes falls?

Understanding the causes of falls can help reduce risk. Falls may be caused by extrinsic or intrinsic factors.

Extrinsic factors

Extrinsic factors are related to the environment. For 50 to 80 percent of falls, at least one environmental risk factor is involved (Karlsson, Magnusson, von Schewelov & Rosengren, 2013). Extrinsic factors can also be related to actions.

Extrinsic factors can be on, above or below you:

- On you: Wearing worn out shoes, wearing shoes that do not fit, wearing pants that are too long
- Above you: working under inadequate lighting
- Below you: walking on slippery surface, tripping on an object, stepping on uneven surface

Extrinsic factors found in the home environment:

- Slipping or tripping inside and outside
- Books, magazines or papers on the floor
- Leaves
- Rocks
- Wet, icy or snowy surfaces
- Slippery floor
- Tripping on loose carpets and rugs
- Tripping on electrical cords
- Falling over crowded furniture



Doing activities that might cause you to lose balance

- Reaching for items located on high shelves
- Falling off of an unstable chair or using an unstable table for balance
- Falling out of a high bed
- Stumbling while using a low toilet seat
- Losing balance in the bathroom due to lack of rails near the toilet and shower
- Trying to maneuver using poor lighting

Intrinsic factors

Intrinsic factors are issues within individuals. These factors often have a physiological origin. Intrinsic factors can be associated with age related changes. Some examples include:

- Change in vision
- Loss of balance
- Change in muscle strength
- Increased fear of falling



Intrinsic factors can include medical conditions. Individuals with certain medical conditions need more attention as they are prone to falling:

- Diabetes
- Alzheimer's
- Parkinson's
- Stroke
- Arthritis
- Blood pressure
- Heart disease
- Vertigo

Medication is another intrinsic factor. Older individuals often take medications that might cause falls. The following related conditions could lead to falls:

- Drug interaction and side effects
- Sedatives
- Diuretics
- Antidepressants

What to do after a fall

If you fall and are conscious, try to relax and take deep breaths. Try not to move too much for a moment. Determine if you can get up. If you can, first roll to your side. Then slowly get up on your hands and knees. Crawl to a nearby chair or another stable object. Slowly rise and sit in the chair. If you cannot get up, ask others for help. Call 911. Wait for help in



Extrinsic factors: Checklist to prevent falls

Clothing	No	Maybe	Yes
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I wear shoes that are in good condition

I have my feet measured when buying shoes to ensure proper size

My pants hems do not drag on the floor (1/2 inch from floor)

My pants have a moderately wide leg opening

Inside the house	No	Maybe	Yes
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My home has adequate lighting

I store heavy objects on low shelves

My home has clear walking paths

I have secure areas rugs

I keep the floor clean

My dining tables and chairs are stable

The toilet seat in my house is 17 to 19 inches or less from floor ***

The toilet seat in my house is a different color than the rest of the bathroom

The bathrooms in my home have grab bars near the toilet and shower

*** (Peterson, 2010)

Outside the house	No	Maybe	Yes
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The sidewalk and paths outside of my home are intact and even

The sidewalk and pathway outside my house are clear

of leaves, snow and/or trash

The porch and deck outside my house are in good condition

I use hand rails for steps

I use a walker or cane if necessary

Intrinsic factors: Checklist to prevent falls

Exercise	No	Maybe	Yes
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I exercise for balance (ex. walking, Tai Chi, Yoga, Virtual Reality Gaming)

I exercise for muscle strength

Healthcare

I get regular physical check ups

I get regular vision check ups

I take medications according to the directions



a comfortable position, if possible. Consider using a life alert system in the future.

Summary

Falls continue to be a growing problem with older adults. Falls can cause varying levels of injury from a simple strain to severe fracture. Taking care of injuries can be expensive. Steps can be taken to help reduce the risk of falling. Be proactive and address intrinsic and extrinsic factors that cause falls. Preventing falls is important to enhance the quality of life of older adults.

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