

Preventing Falls Among Older Adults

Almost everyone knows someone who has fallen. The fear of a broken bone or hip, being stranded alone on the floor, getting a traumatic brain injury, and/or being moved to a long-term care facility has become an all too common reality for many older individuals who have had a fall. However, falls are not an inevitable part of aging and by knowing the common risk factors, individuals can take control to prevent falls.

How Big is the Problem

Each year, one in every three adults age 65 and older falls. However, many falls can cause moderate to severe injuries, such as hip fractures and head injuries, can be devastating in terms of pain and loss of independence and can increase the risk of death. On average, X individuals ages 65 and older are admitted to a Montana hospital each year due to a fall. Of these, X percent were discharged to a nursing home. Additionally, falls can be costly. The average cost of a fall-related hospital admission is \$ of which, X percent is paid primarily by Medicare. The average nursing home stay for a fall is X days, at the tune of X\$, of which X% is paid for by Medicare. The good news is that falls are largely preventable.

How Can Older Adults Prevent Falls

❶ Begin a regular exercise program

Exercise is one of the most important ways to lower your chances of falling. It makes you stronger and helps you feel better. Exercises that improve balance and coordination (like Tai Chi) are the most helpful. Lack of exercise leads to weakness and increases your chances of falling. Ask your doctor or health care provider about the best type of exercise program for you.

❷ Have your health care provider review your medicines

Have your doctor or pharmacist review all the medicines you take, even over-the-counter medicines. As you get older, the way medicines work in your body can change. Some medicines, or combinations of medicines, can make you sleepy or dizzy and can cause you to fall.

③ Have your vision checked

Have your eyes checked by an eye doctor at least once a year. You may be wearing the wrong glasses or have a condition like glaucoma or cataracts that limits your vision. Poor vision can increase your chances of falling.

④ Make your home safer

About half of all falls happen at home. To make your home safer:

Remove things you can trip over (like papers, books, clothes, and shoes) from stairs and places where you walk. Remove small throw rugs or use double-sided tape to keep the rugs from slipping. Keep items you use often in cabinets you can reach easily without using a step stool.

Have grab bars put in next to your toilet and in the tub or shower. Use non-slip mats in the bathtub and on shower floors. Improve the lighting in your home. As you get older, you need brighter lights to see well. Hang light-weight curtains or shades to reduce glare. Have handrails and lights put in on all staircases. Wear shoes both inside and outside the house. And avoid going barefoot or wearing slippers.

The Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, is working with local communities throughout Montana to implement a community-based fall prevention program, called *Stepping On*, to help older Montanans learn how to reduce the risk for falls. *Stepping On* is a seven week program that meets once a week and promotes strength and balance exercises, home safety and other strategies to prevent falls. To learn if your community has a Stepping On program or if you are interested in learning more about fall prevention, contact Bobbi Perkins, 406-444-4126.