Falls and Hip Fractures Among Older Adults

MORE THAN ONE-THIRD OF ADULTS AGES 65 YEARS AND OLDER FALL EACH YEAR.
Among older adults, falls are the leading cause of injury deaths and the most common cause of nonfatal injuries and hospital admissions for accidents. The chance that a fall will cause a severe injury requiring hospitalization greatly increases with age.

OUTCOMES OF FALLS

- More than 60% of people who die from falls are 75 and older.
- Of those who fall, 20% to 30% suffer moderate to severe injuries such as hip fractures (break in bone) or head injury that reduce mobility and independence, and increase the risk of premature (early) death.
- Among people ages 75 years and older, those who fall are four to five times more likely to be admitted to a long-term care facility for a year or longer.
- Falls are a leading cause of traumatic brain injuries.
- Among older adults, the majority of fractures are caused by falls.
- The most common fractures are of the vertebrae, hip, forearm, leg, ankle, pelvis, upper arm, and hand.
- Of all fall-related fractures, hip fractures cause the greatest number of deaths and lead to the most severe health problems and reduced quality of life.
- Most patients with hip fractures are hospitalized for about one week.
- A fall-related fracture is very predictive of another fracture. This is because of osteoporosis. You should ask your primary care physician for a DEXA scan of bone density and seek appropriate treatment based on those results.

AT RISK

- White men have the highest fall-related death rates, followed by white women, black men and black women.
- Women sustain about 80% of all hip fractures.
- Among both sexes, hip fracture rates increase with age. People ages 85 years and older are 10 to15 times more likely to sustain hip fractures than are people ages 60 to 65.

HOW CAN SENIORS REDUCE THEIR RISK OF FALLING?

- Lower body weakness contributes to falls, so increasing lower body strength and improving balance through regular physical activity is helpful.
- Problems with walking and balance can be improved by Tai Chi, a type of exercise program that has been shown to be very effective.
- Taking four or more medications or any psychoactive medications seem to be harmful. Ask your doctor or pharmacist to review all your medicines (both prescription and over-the-counter) to reduce side effects and interactions. It may be possible to reduce the number of medications used, particularly tranquilizers, sleeping pills, and anti-anxiety drugs
- Studies show that some other important fall risk factors are Parkinson's Disease, history of stroke, arthritis, cognitive impairment, and visual impairments. To reduce these risks, seniors should see a health care provider regularly for chronic (longstanding) conditions and have an eye doctor check their vision at least once a year.
- We cannot change the history of what we have, but perhaps we can make it less likely to repeat the problems causing that history.

WHAT OTHER THINGS MAY HELP REDUCE THE RISKOF FALLING?

- Because seniors spend most of their time at home, one-half to two-thirds of all falls occur in or around the home. Most fall injuries are caused by falls on the same level (not from falling down stairs) and from a standing height (for example, by tripping while walking). Therefore, it makes sense to reduce home hazards and make living areas safer.

- Researchers have found that simply modifying the home does not reduce falls. However, environmental risk factors may contribute to about one-half of home falls.
- Common environmental fall hazards include tripping hazards, lack of stair railings or grab bars, slippery surfaces, unstable furniture, and poor lighting.

TO MAKE LIVING AND LIVING AREAS SAFER, SENIORS SHOULD:

- Remove tripping hazards such as throw rugs and clutter in walkways. Throw rugs are a major cause of falls in the households of many elderly.
- Use non-slip mats in the bathtub and on shower floors.
- Have grab bars next to the toilet and in the tub or shower.
- Have handrails put in on both sides of stairways.
- Improve lighting throughout the home.
- Remove all walkway obstacles which are likely to cause tripping (footstools, etc.).
- Be aware of all pets, which can get under feet and cause tripping.
- Arise slowly from sitting and lying positions. Make sure your balance is good before attempting to navigate without help.

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