

Preventing Falls Among Your Senior Loved Ones

Most people don't know that one in four seniors in North America fall every year and that falls are the leading cause of both fatal and nonfatal injuries for people 65+.

Although there are many potential outcomes from falls, including broken bones, hip fractures and head injuries, even falls with minor injuries can result in a senior becoming nervous and insecure, oftentimes resulting in them being less active.

If you can reduce the risk of those you love falling, that can be a good way to help them maintain their independence, confidence and sustain a high quality of life.

Most falls are preventable if steps are taken to help eliminate unnecessary risks. Here are some suggested common issues that can lead to a fall:

Environment: If someone has lived in their home for a long time it may not occur to them that there are simple modifications that can be made to reduce risk, including eliminating trip hazards, decluttering and covering sharp corners on vanities, cabinets, etc. If a senior has moved recently, there are other risks that can be associated with lack of familiarity that should be considered.

Medications: Depending on the types of medications a person is on they may have one or more side effects to manage. Oftentimes prescriptions can lead to dizziness, insomnia, headache, etc. – all which can increase fall risk.

Balance and Gait: As we age our activity level tends to decrease, along with muscle mass. This combination can lead to weakness, lack of balance and create challenges with mobility.

General Health: Within the senior demographic as many as 80% of people suffer from at least one chronic health condition (ex. stroke, diabetes, etc.). As a result, limited mobility, pain, dependency on medication and lack of confidence can present increased fall risks.

Vision: Blurry vision can present a fall risk simply due to lack of understanding of surroundings. If someone is not able to see potential trip-hazards, sharp corners, etc. they are at risk of injuring themselves.

Many organizations, including the National Council on Aging and the Public Health Agency of Canada, make recommendations on steps to prevent falls. There is a summary of the most vital and beneficial steps below.

- 1) **Involve the person you are concerned about in the simple steps to stay safe.** Sometimes it can be as easy as asking your loved one if they are concerned about falling. Although many people realize falls are common, they don't understand what a large impact they can have on their life if they are injured from them. Reviewing some of the risks and expressing your own concern may help ease some of the stigma around senior falls.
- 2) **Do a walk-through safety assessment of their home.** There are many ways to make a home safer, starting with a simple walk-through of the space to acknowledge any potential risks. Here are some suggestions of what to look for:
 - Cords/floor mats/clutter that could be tripped over
 - Stairs: Make sure there are railings on both sides of the stairs if possible and ensure that all railings are stable and intact.
 - Bathrooms: Install grab bars throughout the washroom, specifically by the toilet and in the shower.
 - Bedrooms: Check the height of bedroom furniture. Getting in/out bed and chairs that are too high or low can cause strain and lead to instability.
 - Lighting throughout the house is important. Dim areas make it hard to see if the floor is level and if there are hazards in the way. It is especially important to light the top and bottom of the stairs and have light switches easily accessible if someone needs to get up in the middle of the night.

**These are some starting suggestions to consider when evaluating the degree of safety at your loved one's home. For professional assistance consult an Occupational Therapist or a Home Healthcare business that specializes in senior safety.

- 3) **Discuss current health and medication specifics.** Try to regularly ask about any new health concerns that your loved one may be experiencing. Are they experiencing issues with memory or having a hard time falling asleep? Do they have a good appetite and are they able to be active and do things that they have always enjoyed? If you keep the conversation open and honest you may be able to prevent an issue before it becomes a larger concern.
- 4) **Be aware.** When you are with this person do they hold onto walls, furniture, etc. when walking for support? Do they seem to have a hard time getting in and out of bed or standing up from a chair? Do you ever notice if they are sore or have any sort of unusual bruising, scrapes, etc.? Although we can do our best to prevent avoidable injuries from occurring, it is still possible that those we care about feel more

comfortable keeping their mobility issues private to maintain their pride and not have you worry about them. Look for these silent indicators that they are struggling or may have already experienced a fall without letting you know. If you notice any of these symptoms it tends to be an indication that it is time to see a Doctor or Physical Therapist that can help provide mobility aids.

It is important to protect those you love whenever and wherever possible. We hope you have found value in the information we have provided and would encourage you to keep informed by visiting our website and other local Senior Wellness websites.

