

## **Looking for a good New Year's Resolution? Commit to Increase Your Confidence and Reduce Your Falls Risk.**

Of all the things you want to do in 2012, having a(nother) fall is certainly not on the list. Falls now exceed motor vehicle crashes in Wisconsin as the most common cause of injury-related deaths. The most common age group for falls, and the ones for whom the falls are the most devastating? You guessed it: older adults. A whopping 90% of fall-related deaths and 70% of fall-related in-patient hospitalizations involve people age 65 and older. It's very disturbing: one out of every three adults age 65 and over falls every year.

Falls are very expensive. Hospitalizations and emergency room visits due to falls result in \$800 million in hospital charges each year in Wisconsin. Over 70% of these costs (more than \$56 million) for fall-related hospitalization and emergency room visits are paid by government insurance programs such as Medicare and Medicaid. And that's just the hospital and ER costs. It doesn't include the costs of home care, rehab stays, physical and occupational therapies after the falls, wound care, time off work for caregivers and on and on....

Falls can be life-changing – in a very bad way – for you as an older adult. The consequences include fracture, head injury, soft-tissue injury, loss of mobility, loss of independent living and death. A fall can impose significant burdens on you, your caregivers, your communities and your local health care system. Falls often lead to older adults having to give up living independently. Approximately 40% of those admitted to a nursing home had a fall in the 30 days prior to admission.

Even if a fall doesn't cause you any injuries, after a fall you may develop a fear of falling again or a loss of confidence that causes you to limit your activities. This fear can lead you to reduce your ability to move around and lose physical conditioning, which in turn could further increase your risk of falling. The threat of a fall can be a barrier to you safely doing all the things you want to do at home and staying actively engaged in your community – volunteering, going to classes, socializing with friends, going to family events, exercising shopping, doing chores, and other activities. Preventing falls is critically important to maintaining your personal independence.

So, looking ahead to 2012, resolve to take control to help prevent falls. Here are some ideas:

- ✓ Have a home assessment and modify your home or apartment as necessary – check out slippery surfaces, obstacles in traffic ways, poor lighting especially on steps and stairs, unsafe practices in reaching or climbing on items to reach objects.
- ✓ Consider adding grab bars in your bathrooms.
- ✓ Remove throw rugs, add handrails and improve lighting.
- ✓ Have your vision checked and if you wear glasses, make sure they're adjusted appropriately. Further, don't delay cataract surgery if needed.
- ✓ Talk to your pharmacist and physician about your medications. Are any of your medications one of the drugs that contributes to falls? Falls are most common with a recent change in dose and as the overall number of prescriptions increases. Are all of your medications needed? Are you taking them at the right time of the day? Is the dosage appropriate for your age, weight and other conditions? Is there a different medication that will address your health problem that doesn't contribute to falls?
- ✓ Go to a good shoe store and evaluate your footwear to make sure your shoes are the right size and have good treads. Safety first, not fashion.
- ✓ Consider gait training, including advice on assistive devices
- ✓ Ask health care providers, physical therapists or fitness instructors for an individualized, progressive exercise program that includes both strength and balance training.

- ✓ Purchase and take vitamin supplements to ensure that you are getting enough Vitamin D daily (800-1000 IUs – international units). There is not enough sun in Wisconsin, even in the summer, to get adequate Vitamin D.
- ✓ Purchase and take calcium supplements; 1200 mg a day is recommended, spread out over the day (for example, take 400 mg three times each day). It's very hard to get this much from food, so read the bottle's labels and get the appropriate supplements. Ask the pharmacist or doctor if you're not sure.
- ✓ Tell your doctor if you have fallen. He or she is not going to push you into a nursing home or call your kids and tell them to do so. Your doctor can recommend a further assessment, review your medications and make other recommendations. Don't keep falls a secret.
- ✓ If some of these ideas cost more than you can afford on your budget, consider asking for these items as gifts from your family for the holidays. They'll be much more valuable to you than another bathrobe or bottle of cologne!

One of the best ways to prevent falls is for an older adult to enroll in the research-proven community workshop, such as *Stepping On*. This is a prevention program that empowers older adults to carry out health behaviors that reduce the risks of falls. *Stepping On* is a community-based workshop offered once a week for seven weeks using adult education principles that build older adults' confidence in your own ability to reduce falls. In a small-group setting, older adults learn strength and balance exercises and develop specific knowledge and skills to prevent falls. Two trained leaders facilitate the workshops. The workshops are not lectures; the participants participate extensively and learn to problem-solve themselves and for each other. Mutual support and success will build your confidence in your ability to manage your health behaviors to reduce your risk of falls and to maintain active and fulfilling lives.

*Stepping On* is offered in Barron County two times each year. Call Trisha Bailkey at the Aging & Disability Resource Center, 715-537-6225 for more information. Our next workshop starts Spring 2012.

So this year, make and keep a New Year's resolution to prevent falls.

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