

Injury Prevention Brief

PREVENTING FALLS

Falls are the leading cause of nonfatal injuries in every age group except ages 15-24 and are the leading cause of injury death among adults 65 years and older in the United States. Approximately 7,000 older adults are hospitalized, and more than 350 die, from a fall every year in Oklahoma. Acute care hospital charges alone total nearly \$237 million. Most fall injuries happen in predictable, preventable ways.

Environment

Most falls happen in homes and are entirely preventable. Simple changes in lighting, housekeeping and furniture arrangement can make older adults less susceptible to falling in their homes.

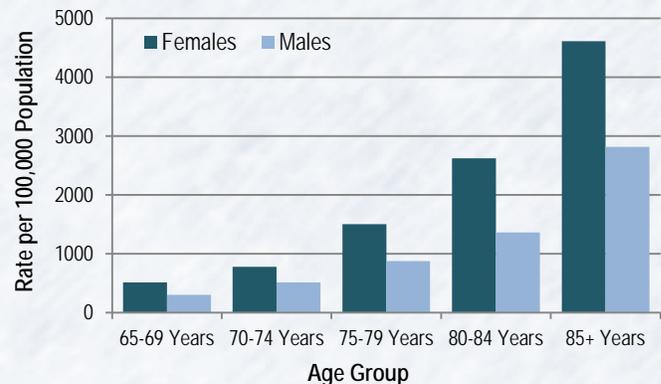
- All rooms in older adults' homes should be well-lit. Put in brighter light bulbs, add lighting to dark areas and install night lights in bedrooms, bathrooms and hallways.
- Clutter and tripping hazards can cause a person of any age to fall. Make sure all pathways are clear and clean.
- Arrange furniture to ensure that there is always a clear pathway to enter and exit a room.
- Many falls occur on stairs and steps. All stairwells should be well-lit, clear of all objects and have handrails on both sides.

Health

Older adults with hip or bone weakness, arthritis, osteoporosis and blood pressure fluctuation are more prone to falls. Those suffering from neurological conditions, Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis or Alzheimer's disease are at an increased risk for falling as well.

- Have a doctor assess an older adult's risk of falling and suggest changes in an older adult's medications or lifestyle to reduce the risk of falling.
- Let doctors know about past falls. A fall can be a sign of a new medical problem that needs attention.

Fall Injury Hospitalization Rates Among Persons 65 Years and Older by Age Group and Gender, Oklahoma, 2011 (N=6,720)



Medication

Many medications have side effects that can affect an older adult's coordination and balance or cause dizziness, confusion or sleepiness.

- Ask a doctor or pharmacist to review all medications, including prescriptions, over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and minerals.
- Have an up-to-date list of all medications and provide it to doctors during visits.
- Make sure medications are properly labeled and there are clear instructions for usage.

Habits

Oftentimes, older adults fear that exercise may lead to a fall, but regular physical activity is the first line of defense against falls and fractures. Physical activity strengthens muscles and increases flexibility and balance.

- Many communities offer group exercise classes for older adults, such as water aerobics and Tai Chi, which uses slow, flowing movements to help relax and coordinate the mind and body. Contact your local community or senior center for classes.
- Mild weight-bearing exercise, like walking or climbing stairs, helps slow bone loss from osteoporosis and increase muscle strength.

Many people who fall, even if they are not injured, develop a fear of falling. This fear may cause them to limit their activities, leading to reduced mobility and loss of physical fitness, which in turn increases their actual risk of falling.

- Encourage older adults to stay active and exercise regularly.
- Doctors can refer older adults to physical therapists to help improve walking confidence.

Tai Chi:

Moving for Better Balance in Oklahoma

Tai Chi: Moving for Better Balance is an evidence-based fall prevention program that was designed to be used in community-based organizations. Accumulating evidence suggests that Tai Chi eight-form exercises are an effective means of improving balance, functional limitations, and muscle strength, which reduces the risk of falling. Tai Chi is a low-impact dance-like exercise that can be done in almost any location. It also helps to build confidence from the fear of falling, which is commonly found in older adults.

Benefits of Tai Chi

- Improves Balance and Posture
- Improves Functional Limitations
- Strengthens Muscles
- Builds Confidence from the Fear of Falling
- Improves Mental and Physical Health (Positive attitudes, self-esteem and well-being)
- Improves Musculoskeletal Conditions (Reduction of arthritic symptoms; increases in flexibility and mobility)
- Improves Cardiovascular Functions
- Reduces Hypertension
- Improves the Quality of Sleep
- Enhances Stamina
- Increases Energy Level
- Relieves Stress

Oklahoma seniors are invited to join a local *Tai Chi: Moving for Better Balance* class. To receive more information on classes and how to prevent falls, contact the OSDH Injury Prevention Service at (405) 271-3430 or visit <http://falls.health.ok.gov>.

Additional Resources

- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**
www.cdc.gov/HomeandRecreationalSafety/Falls/index.html
- **Moving for Better Balance**
<http://tjqmbb.org/>
- **National Council on Aging**
www.ncoa.org/improve-health/falls-prevention/



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