

Keeping Seniors Independent

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Being able to live an independent and productive life can become an increasingly difficult challenge for many seniors. Decreased mobility and independence with daily activities are common problems that all seniors face as they age. Many seniors realize that living independently can quickly become an overwhelming task when illness, injury, or an increasingly sedentary lifestyle takes away the ability to keep up with daily activities.

One of the greatest threats to remaining independent as people age is the increased incidence of falls. Each year, more than one third of adults 65 or older will have at least one fall. Making matters worse, people 75 and older who fall are up to five times more likely to be admitted to a long-term care facility for a year or longer. Falls are not only detrimental to seniors they also put a financial strain on Medicare funds. In the year 2000, direct medical costs to Medicare totaled \$179 million for fatal falls and \$19 *billion* for non-fatal fall injuries.

Research studies have demonstrated that certain interventions are more likely to be effective than others at preventing seniors from falling, and therefore maintaining their independence. For example, a program of muscle-strengthening and balance retraining, provided on an individual basis in a person's home by a trained health professional, was found to be more effective than group-delivered exercise interventions. This "at home" approach is highly effective because it can address many areas of interventions tailored to the individual in their own environment. Studies have also demonstrated that these "at home" programs need to be progressed over time (not just a one time visit) to achieve any benefit in reduction of fall risk. Treatment in the comfort and familiarity of one's own home is also a valuable benefit for seniors to encourage continued completion of home exercise programs and participation with therapy treatments. Services such as these would not only benefit seniors at higher fall risk, but also any senior who has weakness, balance deficits, difficulty with mobility, or continued limitations following an injury or illness.

There are many reasons why seniors are more likely than other age groups to experience a fall. Some of these factors, along with examples, include:

- General changes associated with ageing
 - Decreased postural control
 - Decreased walking speed
 - Muscle weakness
 - Decreased reaction time

- Problems with balance, walking, or mobility
 - Arthritis
 - Stroke
 - Peripheral neuropathy
 - Parkinson's disease

- Visual impairment

Cataracts
Glaucoma

- Personal hazards
Inappropriate footwear or clothing
- Multiple drug therapy
- Indoor Hazards
Bad lighting
Lack of grab rails
Loose rugs
- Outdoor Hazards
Uneven pavements
Icy conditions

The majority of falls can be prevented by modifying unsafe environments and by incorporating an exercise program to improve strength, balance, and mobility. In addition, here are some helpful suggestions to further ensure that you minimize your risk of experiencing a fall.

1. If you have a history of falls, ask your physician for a prescription for a physical therapy evaluation to determine the root cause of the balance deficit.
2. Use an assistive device if needed.
3. Consult with your physician to ensure that you do not have any medication interactions that could increase your risk of falling.
4. Be sure to get your vision checked regularly.
5. Consult with a physical therapist to evaluate your home for fall risk factors.
6. Carry a cordless phone, cell phone, or emergency call button that allows you to contact someone that can assist you in case of a fall.
7. Stay active! Even walking and daily household activities can significantly help maintain your balance and mobility.

Joshua Cohen, PT, MS, is the owner of Mobile Rehab in-home physical therapy. Joshua developed Mobile Rehab after seeing a need for in-home physical therapy for seniors who chose not to travel to a clinic for physical therapy and wish to get the benefit of individualized home-based therapeutic instruction under their Medicare benefits. Please call 919-636-2423 for further information or to set up an appointment.