

# Partners in Quality Care

May 2022



## Objectives:

- Falls statistics
- Observing for fall risks
- Fall prevention-home safety
- Fall prevention - equipment safety
- Ways to assist with fall prevention

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## Falls Prevention

According to the CDC, falls are the leading cause of both fatal and nonfatal injuries in people aged 65 and older and falls can lead to significant functional decline and extensive medical costs. More than 1 in 4 older adults fall each year and **falling once increases their chances of falling again**. Fall injuries can be severe including hip fractures and traumatic brain injury, or TBI. Falls can result in a permanent disability, prolonged hospitalizations, and nursing home admission. **Falls are the most common type of accident for the elderly home care client**. There are many factors that can contribute to falls. There may be environmental issues, such as stairs, cluttered rooms, items on the floor, or wet floors in the kitchen or bathroom. A person may have medical conditions and/or medications that make them more susceptible to falls as well.

Many falls do not cause injuries. But one out of five falls does cause a serious injury such as a broken bone or a head injury. These injuries can make it hard for a person to get around, do everyday activities, or live on their own.

- Falls can cause broken bones, like wrist, arm, ankle, and hip fractures.
- Falls can cause head injuries. These can be very serious, especially if the person is taking certain medicines (like blood thinners). An older person who falls and hits their head should see their doctor right away to make sure they don't have a brain injury.
- Many people who fall, even if they're not injured, become afraid of falling. This fear may cause a person to cut down on their everyday activities. When a person is less active, they become weaker, and this increases their chances of falling.

Research has identified many conditions that contribute to falling. These are called risk factors. Many risk factors can be changed or modified to help prevent falls. They include:

- Lower body weakness
- Vitamin D deficiency (that is, not enough vitamin D in a person's system)
- Difficulties with walking and balance
- Use of medicines, such as tranquilizers, sedatives, or antidepressants. Even some over-the-counter medicines can affect balance and how steady a person is on their feet.
- Vision problems and wearing certain type of eyeglasses (bifocals, trifocals, or progressive lenses can make it hard to know where to step when a person is stepping on a raised service such as stairs)
- Foot pain or poor footwear (floppy shoes without support, wearing socks and no shoes, etc.)
- Home hazards or dangers such as
  - broken or uneven steps, and
  - throw rugs or clutter that can be tripped over.

Most falls are caused by a combination of risk factors. The more risk factors a person has, the greater their chances of falling. Observe and report if the person you are caring for is holding onto walls, furniture, or someone else when walking, or if there is difficulty arising from a chair.

## **Falls Prevention**

Most falls happen at home. Report if a client falls while you are in the home. Talk to your supervisor regarding the steps to take if you witness a client fall and be prepared to call emergency services for instructions and assistance. It is important to know how to assist a client who has fallen in order to prevent causing potential harm by trying to help the client on your own. Trained emergency service personnel can assist in helping with the client. Report to your supervisor if a client reports they have fallen even if you did not witness the fall, or if they are worried about falling, or seem unsteady. A person with balance problems is at risk of falling. The client may need additional support and changes in the plan of care if they are at risk of falling.

Some prescription drugs, over-the-counter medications, and herbal supplements can cause dizziness, sedation, confusion, blurred vision, or orthostatic hypotension (orthostatic or postural hypotension is when a person's blood pressure drops when they go from lying down to sitting up, or from sitting to standing). When a person's blood pressure drops, less blood can go to their organs and muscles. This can make a person more likely to fall. A person with postural hypotension may have dizziness or lightheadedness. Encourage a client who has dizziness or lightheadedness from lying or sitting to get out of bed slowly, and to first sit up, sit on the side of the bed, then stand up. Assist the client as needed per the plan of care.

Other tips are to encourage your client to take their time when changing position (such as when getting up from a chair). Encourage the client to sit down when washing, showering, dressing and assist the client according to the plan of care. The client may need a shower or bath chair, notify your supervisor if the client is dizzy and does not have a shower or bath chair to use while bathing. A client can trip and fall if they are trying to pull on a pair of pants or bending down to put on shoes, encourage the client to sit for these activities. Report to your supervisor if your client has dizziness when standing, the client may need a walker or other assistive device prescribed and fitted by their healthcare provider as a mobility aid.

## **Falls Prevention- Equipment Safety**

Safely using equipment with a client can help in reducing accidents and falls. If you are instructed to assist a client with ambulation, be sure to follow instructions on the plan of care for any assistive devices to be used. Be sure to receive training in the use of any assistive devices including gait belts.

- If a client uses a cane or walker, make sure all pieces are securely intact and that there are rubber tips in place to prevent slipping. Poorly fitted aids can increase the risk of falling.
- Check to make sure wheelchair brakes work properly. A client may also have a lift chair to help with standing from sitting, encourage the client to use the chair as needed.
- It is important that all client equipment be sturdy, safe and in proper working order.
- If you have a concern regarding any unsafe equipment, be sure to contact your supervisor.
- Do not use equipment that you have a safety concern about until you discuss it with your supervisor.
- Some clients will use side rails on their beds. These protect the client from falling out of bed and can be used to assist in turning over in bed. If a client takes a medication at night that causes drowsiness, the client may use side rails as a protective measure. Be sure rails lock properly and do not fall down.
- Safely using equipment with a client can help in reducing accidents and falls. If the client has visitors, check to make sure they did not move any of the devices the client needs to remain stable.
- Be aware of uneven surfaces outside of the client's home and be aware of slick surfaces after it rains, or in the early morning dew, or during times of inclement weather such as ice or snow.

### **Falls Prevention- Home Safety**

- Bathrooms can be especially hazardous with wet surfaces. Encourage the client to have grab bars installed in the bathroom, next to and inside the tub/shower, and next to the toilet (a towel rack is not a grab bar, it can be pulled down with pressure). Notify your supervisor if the client needs assistance with having grab bars installed, your agency should have a list of community resources that can assist with home safety improvements. Encourage the client to use non-slip mats in the bathtub and on shower floors. Do not use bath oil in the bathwater, this causes slick surfaces. If you observe your client rushing to the bathroom to avoid incontinence, report this to your supervisor. The client may need a bedside commode and or to use incontinence undergarments to prevent fear of not making it to the bathroom in time. Rushing to the bathroom can lead to falls.
- Handrails and grab bars can assist the client in maneuvering throughout their home or in the bathroom. Encourage clients to have handrails and lights installed on all staircases. Handrails might be located in hallways, stairways, and bathrooms.
- Keep floors clutter-free. Small furniture, pet bowls, electrical cords, and other items or clutter on the floor are a trip hazard.
- Small pets can get under a person's foot and cause a trip and fall, encourage your client to be especially cautious and careful when there are pets in the home.
- Encourage the client to remove small throw rugs or use double-sided tape to keep the rugs from slipping. Encourage the client to have their furniture arranged so that there is plenty of room to walk freely with an assistive device.
- Make sure the home has lots of light. Keep items the client uses often in cabinets they can reach easily without using a step stool.

### **Ways to assist the client with fall prevention**

- Be sure there is adequate lighting in rooms, halls, and bathrooms.
- Put night-lights in bedrooms, halls, and bathrooms.
- Do not use wax on floors when cleaning.
- Ensure that electrical cords are out of the way.
- Help the client with keeping their phone nearby.
- Be sure client is wearing nonskid shoes or slippers, and that clothing does not hang down too low or drag on the floor.
- Ensure that crutches, canes, and/or walkers have nonskid tips.
- Clean up any spills that happen to avoid wet floors (e.g., in the bathroom after a bath/shower, or in the kitchen).
- Encourage the client to keep a flashlight by the bed in case the power goes out and they need to get up at night.
- Encourage the client to exercise and work on strengthening exercises. If you are assigned to assist the client with exercises or range of motion exercises, follow the plan of care and instructions given. Your agency may be able to arrange home physical therapy for a client for strengthening exercises.
- Encourage your client to wear their glasses and hearing aids if applicable.
- Keep in mind a person can have a fall because of vestibular system dysfunction. The vestibular system lives in the inner ear and tells the brain where a person is relative to their surroundings. If the vestibular system is damaged due to illness or injury, a person might experience dizziness, imbalance, disorientation, or even spinning vertigo, resulting in a fall. If a person has a vestibular disorder, be sure to take precautions to help prevent a fall.