

## **Fear of Falling**

*For seniors, a fall can be a life-altering event*

*By Sherry A. Mearns, Marketing Director for AllPro Home Health*

Is falling becoming more prevalent among seniors, or are professionals just doing a better job of monitoring the instances of falls? In either case, there can be no question that the danger of falls to seniors is great. In fact, preventing falls has become a national health priority.

Let's consider some statistics:

- \$30 billion is spent annually on healthcare related to falls. Medicare costs alone for hip fractures as a result of falls is projected to reach \$240 billion by 2040.
- The average cost of a fall injury was \$19,440 (including hospital, nursing home, emergency room and home healthcare), not counting physician services.
- The Elder Fall Prevention Act was passed by Congress in 2003 for the development of effective public education, expansion of services and research on best practices concerning seniors and falls.
- About a third of the population over the age of 65 falls each year, and the risk of falls increases proportionately with age. At 80 years, over half of seniors fall annually.
- Up to 40% of stroke victims will have a serious fall within the next year.

As alarming as they are, these documented statistics fall short of the actual number since many incidents are unreported by seniors and unrecognized by family members or caregivers.

Treated or not, a fall for a senior is not likely to be a one-time event. In fact, those who fall are two to three times more likely to fall again, and more than half (53%) of the older adults who are discharged from the hospital for fall-related hip fractures will experience another fall within six months.

Falling is the leading cause of death due to injury among the elderly, and 87% of all fractures in the elderly are due to falls.

Falls account for 25% of all hospital admissions among the elderly and 40% of all nursing home admissions. Among those going to the hospital or nursing home, some 40% do not return to independent living and 25% die within a year.

The medical alert commercial about the lady who has "fallen and can't get up" has become a punch line in the popular media, but there's nothing funny about a senior citizen who finds themselves in such a predicament. Even when falls do not result in injuries, a large percentage of non-injured fallers (47%) cannot get up without assistance.

For the elderly who fall and are unable to get up on their own, the time spent immobile can have an adverse effect on their health. Muscle cell breakdown starts to occur within 30-60 minutes of compression due to falling. Dehydration, pressure sores, hypothermia, and pneumonia are other complications that may result.

Getting help after an immobilizing fall, however, improves the chance of survival by 80% and increases the likelihood of a return to independent living.

### **Staying active means fewer falls**

Some people may think the best thing for seniors to do if they have fallen, or are afraid of falling, is to curtail their activities and remain as immobile as possible. Why take the chance of falling again?

Well, research shows that the opposite is the case. Less-active seniors are more likely to fall, because they lack the strength and balance and they need to resist falls. That's why healthcare professionals recommend that seniors begin a regular exercise routine of any kind – even if they start by taking only a few steps every day.

When we are young, we learn to balance ourselves, and unless we continue to use our balance under safe conditions, this vital skill diminishes as we age. Balance also helps keep the mass of our body over our feet, which helps maintain stability when moving our weight from one position to another.

We can improve our balance with exercise, which also increases strength and stamina. Giving the heart, lungs and the rest of the cardiovascular system even a modest workout can make a tremendous difference in the way a person feels and in their energy level, allowing them to go about enjoying life as best as they can.

One of the best forms of exercise for seniors is walking, either alone, with a companion, or with a cane or walker. As they practice walking, they will regain some of the spring in their and develop a stronger, safer and more fluid gait.

Finally, exercise can enhance the reflexes, making the senior more responsive and helping them react safely to obstacles in their path and other potential dangers. The best way to avoid a fall is to be prepared, both physically and mentally.

*AllPro Home Health is a Medicare-certified home health agency serving Sarasota and Charlotte counties. AllPro specializes in skilled nursing; physical, occupational and speech therapies; and medical social work. For more information, contact Sherry Mearns at (941) 258-5997.*