

Falling and the elderly

As you age, the risk of falling increases. Changes in vision and balance and a number of other medical and physical conditions can contribute to an increased risk of falling. Approximately 30% of older adults not in hospitals or care facilities fall each year.

Because most people also lose bone density as they grow older, the risk of suffering broken bones (fractures) from fall-induced injuries also is a major concern.

Researchers reporting in the May 26,

1999, issue of *JAMA* state that the number of older persons with fall-induced injury is increasing at a tremendous rate. Although the study, which looked at fall-induced injuries in people over the age of 50 from 1970 to 1995, was conducted in Finland, the researchers believe this is a major international public health problem, especially in developed countries with aging populations. They call for vigorous preventive measures to be adopted to control the increasing burden of these injuries.

HOME SAFETY TIPS:

- Make sure all handles in bathrooms and railings or banisters on stairs are secure.

- Secure loose wires to a wall or molding.

- Make sure all rooms are well lit.

- Place non-slip mats or appliques in bathtubs and showers and near sinks, laundry, and other areas that have the potential to get wet.
- Do not polish uncovered floors to a slippery finish. Make sure carpet edges are firmly fixed to the floor.

- Loose rugs and mats should be avoided.

- Keep floors clear of shoes and other clutter.

- Do not place furniture with protruding legs in frequently used areas of a room.

IF SOMEONE FALLS:

Get immediate medical help if an elderly person falls and is unconscious, in severe pain, bleeding profusely, burned, has suspected broken bones, or appears severely ill. Less severe falls should be brought to the attention of the person's doctor as well.

SAFEGUARD AGAINST FALLING:

- Have your vision and hearing checked regularly.
- Talk to your doctor about side effects of drugs that could affect your coordination and balance.
- Limit the amount of alcohol you drink.
- Wear rubber-soled and low-heeled shoes that fit well and fully support your feet.
- Be careful when walking outdoors on wet or icy sidewalks.
- Exercise regularly to maintain strong bones, strength, and flexibility.
- Keep the temperature in your home at a comfortable level, because being too hot or cold can make you dizzy.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- National Institute on Aging
Preventing Falls and Fractures
800/222-2225
800/222-4225 (TTY) or
www.nih.gov/nia

INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm.

Additional Sources: National Institute on Aging, American Geriatrics Society, Mayo Clinic, AMA's Encyclopedia of Medicine

Mi Young Hwang, Writer
Richard M. Glass, MD, Editor
Jeff Molter, Director of Science News

The JAMA Patient Page is a public service of JAMA and the AMA. The information and recommendations appearing on this page are appropriate in most instances; but they are not a substitute for medical diagnosis. For specific information concerning your personal medical condition, JAMA and AMA suggest that you consult your physician. This page may be reproduced noncommercially by physicians and other health care professionals to share with patients. Any other reproduction is subject to AMA approval. To purchase bulk reprints, call 212/354-0050.

