



Falls Risks and Daily Preventive Measures for Adults and the Elderly

For enquiries and appointments,
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Falls Prevention Committee

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Falls prevention is crucial for our well-being. As people age, factors such as muscle loss, joint degeneration, and slower reactions increase the risk of falls. Deteriorating vision and hearing, along with cognitive impairments, can further increase falls risk. Research has shown that falls contributed to 74.5% of injury episodes in people aged 65 or above in a single year¹, possibly causing fractures and impacting one's mobility. The consequences can be severe.

When are falls most likely occur?

- When one gets up from bed or stands up after sitting for a long time.
- People are prone to falls when, due to urgency to urinate, they wake up from a deep sleep and are not fully awake while going to the restroom. Still groggy, they are more likely to trip over objects on the floor due to poor hand and foot coordination, especially if the floor is slippery. In Urology, nocturia occurs when one has to get up more than once at night, i.e. twice or more, to urinate.
- Falls are also common in outdoor environments, e.g. uneven or slippery surfaces, crowded areas, poorly-lit spaces, and while using stairs or escalators.



Why do the elderly fall more often?

Due to many physiological changes, we tend to fall more readily as we age. Muscle loss and joint degeneration can lead to decreased strength and balance, making it more difficult to maintain stability. Slower reflexes and reaction times may also make one less capable of avoiding falls. Moreover, age-related deterioration in vision and hearing can affect spatial awareness and balance. Cognitive impairments may also further compromise one's judgment and decision-making abilities, thereby increasing falls risk.

Why do falls have such a big impact on the elderly and their physical abilities?

Falls can have severe consequences for the elderly, especially in terms of physical well-being. For individuals taking medications such as antiplatelet or anticoagulant drugs, falls may increase the risk of bleeding. Falls-related fractures or intracranial bleeding can result in long-term impacts on mobility, cognition, and self-care abilities.



Can repeated falls in young adults be an early sign of a serious condition?

Regardless of age, people are more likely to fall when they are in a hurry and walk fast without paying attention to their surroundings. However, common neurological conditions such as stroke, Parkinson's disease can affect limb movement and balance, thus increasing falls risk. Patients with conditions such as Spinocerebellar Ataxia may walk unsteadily and fall more readily as their balance system is compromised. Others suffering cognitive impairments are also more prone to falls as a result of reduced awareness of the environment. Apart from neurological conditions, individuals with certain heart or orthopaedic problems, such as joint pain or mobility difficulties, may also be more susceptible to falls, and so do those being less alert to their surrounding because of poor vision. Please consult a doctor for a check-up if repeated falls occur.

What can we do when an elderly fall?

When an elderly fall, it is important to assess his/her condition and provide appropriate assistance. Check if they remain conscious and feel any pain or discomfort. Try to get more details about the fall, e.g. if dizziness or other symptoms occur. Measuring blood pressure, pulse and blood sugar levels (especially for those with diabetes) can help identify the underlying causes of the fall.

Should the elderly seek medical attention if they suffer no severe injury after a fall?

They are advised to see a doctor for examination after a fall as they may not be able to explain their discomfort. Some of them may even downplay the injuries and act as if everything is fine. Doctors will assess the degree of injury and determine the cause of falls, such as health conditions, medicinal side effects or environmental factors.

How is nocturia (frequent urination at night) associated with the risk of falling?

Nocturia can be caused by different factors, including prostate or bladder problems, polyuria (excessive urine production), dietary habits, or the use of medications like diuretics for diabetes, heart disease, or high blood pressure. All these factors can contribute to nighttime urination or nocturia, i.e. when one needs to wake up from sleep to urinate at least twice a night.

The elderly are at high risk of falling and tripping while getting up from bed or standing up. It is especially so when, due to an urge to urinate, they wake up from sleep and go to the washroom in the dark, still groggy. The risk is even greater when the floor is slippery. The elderly are more likely to suffer bone fractures after falls.

How to prevent falls?

Falls prevention is most effective when specific risk factors are addressed with proper strategies:

- Exercise regularly: Moderate physical activity can improve muscle strength, balance, and coordination. Elderly can choose suitable exercise such as walking, swimming, tai chi, or yoga based on their age.
- Keep home environment safe and hazard-free: Make sure there are no loose carpets, clutter or wires at home, and the floors are not slippery. Install safety devices in the bathroom, such as non-slip mats, handrails and safety rails.
- Use assistive devices: Elderly may consider using assistive devices such as canes, walkers, or crutches for extra support and stability.
- Maintain a balanced diet: Adequate protein, vitamin D, and calcium can strengthen bone health and muscle function.
- Manage health conditions: It helps decrease falls risk when chronic conditions such as hypertension or diabetes are managed properly. Bone density testing can assess the risk of osteoporosis. Regular physical, vision and hearing check-ups can also identify any physical issues or potential risk factors. If you have nocturia, please consult a doctor as early as possible for proper treatment or advice.
- Review medications regularly: Certain medications may increase falls risk. The medication regimen should be assessed and adjusted by doctor if necessary.
- Stay attentive and alert: Be extra careful while walking or engaging in certain activities. Stay focused and try not to be in a hurry. Beware of the surrounding.

These are some of the common methods to prevent recurrent fall, which can significantly reduce falls risk of the elderly. As the situation may vary from person to person, it is advisable to come up with a personalised fall prevention plan with your doctor.

Please scan the QR codes for videos related to falls risks and prevention:



Falls in the Elderly

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Is Falling Down Simply Due to Carelessness?

Dr. NG Ping Wing
Specialist in Neurology



Nocturia

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Reference:

1. Centre for Health Protection, Department of Health, HKSAR. (2018) Report of Unintentional Injury Survey 2018.
https://www.chp.gov.hk/files/pdf/report_of_unintentional_injury_survey_2018_en.pdf