

Preventing seniors from falling

By Dee Ann Campbell
The Choctaw Sun Sun

GILBERTTOWN — For Americans over the age of 65, chances are it will happen to them.

In fact, it happens to more than 12 million senior citizens in the United States each year — about 1/3 of the population in that age group, and the numbers have increased by up to 73% in the past few years alone.

According to data from the National Safety Council, each week more than 30,000 people over the age of 65 are seriously injured in a fall, and nearly 250 die from their injuries. Falls are the leading cause of emergency room visits, and the leading cause of injury-related deaths for both males and females age 75 and older.

Of those who do survive a fall, 20 to 30% suffer from injuries that affect them for the rest of their lives.

The most common serious injury attributed to falls is hip fracture, and many of those who suffer from the injury never fully recover. More than 24% of all people suffering a hip fracture die within a year of the fall, and another 50% never return to their prior level of independence.

While it may seem that falls are an inevitable fact of life for the elderly, new studies indicate that many falls may be related to factors that are controllable. In fact, the causes of many falls among the elderly can be traced to medical problems that may seem unrelated to the trauma.

According to a report in the October 2006 issue of Archives of Internal

Medicine, falling by elderly men may be directly related to low testosterone levels.

In a study of 2,587 men age 65 to 89, conducted by the Oregon Health and Science University, 56% of the men fell at least once. But those with lower testosterone levels were significantly more likely to fall and to fall multiple times than those with higher levels of testosterone.

Among men with the lowest testosterone levels, the risk for falling was 40% higher than among those with the highest testosterone levels. The association was even stronger in the youngest portion of the senior men, those age 65 to 69.

Although it is yet unclear the extent of the link between falls and testosterone, more research is being done to provide additional information on the linkage.

In addition to the connection between testosterone and falls, senior citizens who suffer from insomnia may also be at higher risk.

Although many have placed blame on the use of sleeping pills for increased numbers of falls at night, a new study by the University of Michigan Health System suggests that the real culprit may be the underlying insomnia, rather than the medications used to treat it. The study showed that nursing home residents with untreated, or partially treated, insomnia have a much higher risk of falls than those who take sleep medications and get relief from their insomnia.

Individuals who had untreated insomnia at the start of the study were 90% more likely to fall



■ New studies may reduce incidence of falls among elderly

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compared with those who did not have insomnia. By contrast, those who were taking sleep drugs to treat their insomnia were only 29% more likely to fall.

Nursing home residents who were on sleep medications and reported no problems sleeping at the start of the study had about the same risk of falling as those who slept well without drugs. But those with insomnia who were not on sleep medications had a 55% greater risk of falling, and those who took sleep drugs but still suffered from insomnia had a 32% greater risk of falls.

Although about 20% of falls happen in a nursing facility, by far, the large majority of senior falls —

54% — occur in the home, and many of them are fatal. Each year, about 5,000 senior citizens in the United States die after falling at home.

Typical scenarios for falls include:

- Falls down stairs (while descending or ascending).

- Falls while transitioning from standing to sitting (and vice versa) on furniture, toilets, beds, bathtubs, etc.

- Falls from tripping over loose carpets, cords, and other obstacles on the floor.

- Falls from climbing on ladders and step stools.

Obviously, the prevention of some falls can be accomplished merely by changing these circumstances that cause them in the home — by limiting the

need for stair-climbing, removing loose carpeting and other obstacles, and by adding handrails in the bathroom and other areas of the home. Studies show that preventive measures in the home can reduce the risk of falls by up to 25%.

Some of the best preventive measures are:

- Rugs secured by non-slip backing or adhesive tape,

- handrails on both sides of stairways and hallways,

- proper lighting at the top and bottom of the stairs, and

- grab bars in the bath or shower.

Seniors can also reduce their risk of falling by wearing certain types of shoes. Those wearing athletic shoes are the least likely to suffer falls, while

those who do not wear shoes around the house suffered the most falls.

But changes in the home will obviously not prevent all falls. With the growing numbers of seniors who are injured or die from falls, national experts have been working together to find the solution.

The first national conference dedicated to preventing falls by older Americans met in Washington, D.C. in December, 2004, to examine the causes and prevention of falls among senior citizens.

Since then, the National Safety Council (NSC) along with the Consumer Product Safety Commission (NPSC) has been working with members of Congress to develop elderly falls prevention legislation. The resulting Elderly Falls Prevention Act has been passed to provide the basis for a national education program to promote public education about the risks and prevention of falls.

To combat the insomnia problems — and the falls that go along with it — the National Sleep Foundation launched the first Insomnia Awareness Day on March 30, 2005, to raise awareness about the high levels of insomnia in the United States and the health repercussions that can stem from it, including falls by the elderly.

Whether because of insomnia or testosterone levels, or because obstacles in the home, the incidence of elderly citizens who suffer devastating effects from falls continues to climb. For those who provide care for them, the challenge is to bring about whatever preventive measures are necessary to keep the elderly safe from falls that could dramatically alter, or perhaps even end, their lives.

“I like being part of the hospital team. They’re like my other family.”

Betsy Adams
Wellness Center

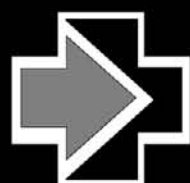


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Helping the Wellness Center grow over the years is important to Betsy Adams.

“It’s a great feeling to watch this program grow. We’ve come a long way from a little room tucked down in the basement.”

For 28 years, Betsy has coaxed, cajoled and encouraged Wellness Center members to continue to work toward better health. Her vibrant smile and energetic attitude are key ingredients in the growth of the center from a small room with 8 machines to the much larger facility with 23 machines. In May, her coworkers officially recognized her contributions by naming her as the THA Employee of the Month.



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