If you or someone you care for is an older adult, the following tips can prevent injury, increase independence, and will help older adults enjoy physical activity without fear of falling while in or out of the home.

Fall Prevention: Tips for Older Adults, Families, and Caregivers

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Unintentional falls are the number one cause of fatal injury and hospitalization of adults aged 65 and older in the United States and Florida. According to the Center for Disease Control, one out of three people in this age group fall each year, costing $30 billion per year in medical costs. In Florida, the Department of Health reports fatal injuries caused by falling among adults age 65 and older is higher than deaths caused by motor vehicle traffic crashes, poisoning, or firearms combined. If you or someone you care for is an older adult, the following tips can prevent injury, increase independence, and will help older adults enjoy physical activity without fear of falling while in or out of the home.

Tip 1: Improve bone health

Talk with your physician about how to improve your bone health. Weight bearing exercises, like walking, are one way to increase bone density needed to strengthen bones and lessen the chance of fractures. Remember to walk within your tolerance levels. Gradually increase time spent walking from a half hour to one hour per day.

Tip 2: Check your vision

Many older adults require corrective lenses for near and far sightedness. The right prescription for glasses can help reduce falls as you can see more clearly and avoid obstacles. Be sure your glasses are the right prescription!

Tip 3: Review your medications

Talk with your physician about medications you are currently taking. Some medications, such as sleeping aides, can affect your balance. Also, extremely low blood pressure or glucose levels can lead to dizziness or light-headedness resulting in falls.

Tip 4: Exercise regularly

Regular exercise can improve your coordination and muscle strength. Walking and swimming are two good exercises which help to increase endurance. Tai Chi is an excellent way to stay flexible and keep your muscles moving. Many community centers offer Tai Chi for seniors! Always consult with a physician before starting any exercise regimen.

Tip 5: Wear proper footwear

Wearing proper footwear is important to safely navigate through any environment. Well-fitting, low-heeled shoes with non-slip soles are the best for indoors. Crepe shoes are excellent for outdoors as they are not too slippery, like leather soled shoes.

If you currently use or desire an assistive device like a walking cane to travel over uneven surfaces, make sure to check with your medical doctor. Your doctor can refer you to a physical/occupational therapist who can help choose the correct walking device. The wrong assistive device or one that is improperly used can result in more falls.

Tip 6: Look for Hazards in the Home

Non-slip strips add extra traction for loose rugs and stairs that need repair. Add handrails to staircases. Frequently used areas at night, like the kitchen and bathroom, should be well lit. Use a flashlight and night lights to make the path to these common areas easier to see. Also, remove any clutter or obstacles in the house that may cause a fall. Be certain to clean up spills right away. When storing everyday items, place them in easy to reach areas that are no lower than your knees and no higher than your shoulders. A shower chair may be appropriate for persons who are unable to stand or cannot stand for short/long time periods. Install rails to assist with getting in and out of the bathtub or shower, but be sure they are firmly affixed to the wall.

Tip 7: Use caution outdoors

Be sure you are always in an area that is well lit, especially when parking. Wet sidewalks, stairs, and streets can be slippery, so be extra cautious. If you exercise outdoors, know your limits. For example, there is no shame in taking a rest when tired during a long walk in the neighborhood or park.

Tip 8: Consult the right expert

If you or someone you care for has either started to fall a lot or is afraid of falling, it is important to consult the right expert who is equipped to specifically address your needs. A family physician can rule out inner ear problems through a medical examination, which can lead to a decrease in problems with balance, vision, medication side effects, or other medical reasons for falling. A physical therapist can develop a tailored exercise routine, which will help increase stamina and strength, and provide the right assistive devices to aide with walking. An occupational therapist can help older adults identify the core problems with falling, such as environmental and physical issues and by working toward solutions that increase active engagement in the environment.

Debora Oliveira is an assistant professor and interim director of the Division of Occupational Therapy in the School of Allied Health Sciences at Florida A&M University. She has been a clinician and instructor for more than 30 years. **Join Dr. Oliveira for a live Twitter chat on Nov. 22 at 6 p.m. to answer your questions and receive tips on how older adults and caregivers can prevent unintentional falls. Follow @FAMU_LivingWell.**