Taking Steps to Prevent Falls

Falls are a leading cause of injury to older adults and can mean the difference between aging gracefully or suffering an injury that can cause more problems and difficulties. In fact, it is estimated that more than 3 million older adults are treated in emergency departments for fall injuries each year.

But the good news is that many falls can be prevented. Safe walking including with equipment such as a walker or cane, proper footwear, understanding of medication side effects, a good exercise program, good vision or modifications to support good vision, and a home free of tripping hazards can all help reduce the likelihood of falls.

“Falls are a huge issue for the older population,” says Suzanne Ryer, a geriatric physical therapist with Advocate Aurora Health and co-chair of the Milwaukee County Falls Prevention Coalition. “One of the misconceptions is that falls are natural as we age. Of course, we are more at risk of falling because of changes in our bodies and medical conditions that occur with age. But just because you’re aging doesn’t mean you have to fall.”

Ryer notes that some medications – especially when used in conjunction with other medications – can increase the risk of falls. People should have regular medication reviews with either their physician or pharmacist to ensure drug interactions don’t cause weakness or dizziness, she says. And that includes over the counter medications such as allergy medicines. “Just because some things are over the counter does not mean there are no side effects which can contribute to falls.”

Home environments are also important - bathrooms should have grab bars (not towel bars) near the toilet and in the shower and floor mats should be secured to the ground. Walkways should be clear of clutter and tripping hazards such as cords or loose rugs.

Gait and strength are also important. “And people who walk slower are more likely to fall because they can’t interact with the environment as quickly,” Ryer says. “And those with poor balance are more likely to fall.”

Exercises that focus on balance, strength and flexibility and which promote walking can improve gait, Ryer says. “All of these are a factor in a comprehensive and effective exercise program to prevent falls.”

Ryer says individuals should talk with a medical professional before beginning any exercise routine and notes that strength exercises such as standing up and sitting down on a chair to build leg strength is important. Balance exercises can include standing with varied foot positions such as feet closer together or one in front of the other.

Footwear is critical – don’t walk barefoot or in socks, she says. “Wear proper fitting shoes and footwear in all environments, have shoes with a low heel and a thin hard sole. Footwear should be able to be tightened and slip-on shoes should be avoided.”

Ryer says addressing falls and talking about how to prevent them are tough conversations. “Falls are very complex issues,” she says. “There’s a lot of stigma when we talk about falls. There are so many things that can be done to prevent falls. There are risk factors that can be changed to prevent falls.”
Volunteer Spotlight

Ron Talsky says he was raised to help people and in retirement, he’s doing just that. “It’s important work to get people to medical appointments and drive them to the grocery store,” says the 70-year-old Franklin resident.

“If I can work on building up the community a little bit by doing these things, then that’s what life is all about.”

About seven or eight years ago, as Ron was nearing retirement from an accounting career, he heard about volunteering to help older adults through his parish, St. Alphonsus in Greendale. He started driving adults then and increased his involvement when he retired five years ago. He now drives clients twice a week.

In fact, Ron has been with one client, George, for about four years now. Every two weeks, Ron drives George to the nearby Aldi’s on Highway 100. While George shops, Ron sometimes shops too. Or Ron brings a book and reads it in the store while George shops. “Then I help him put groceries in boxes and drive him home again,” Ron says. “We have quite a good friendship.”

Ron says he likes volunteering because it provides him with structure but likes volunteering with Eras because he enjoys meeting and working with older adults. “Many of them have wonderful, positive outlooks and are very appreciative for the help they are receiving,” Ron says. “And volunteering to drive someone doesn’t take very long – maybe only a few hours a week.”

Ron adds, “It’s an honor. I was brought up to be of service to people. I want to give back a little bit.”

Shoo the Flu and Get Your Flu Shots This Fall

Influenza vaccines will soon be available through your medical provider or from community health centers and pharmacies. It is important to receive an annual flu shot each fall to ensure you are protected from seasonal influenza which can sometimes last through spring.

Flu is a highly contagious virus which is spread by coughing, sneezing or by having close contact with infected individuals. It is especially dangerous for adults 65+ in the winter months because they have a high risk of developing serious complications.

Getting a flu shot each year is important because a vaccine’s immunity decreases over time and because each year’s vaccine is focused on fighting new influenza viruses that the CDC believes will be most prevalent during that particular season.

Some individuals who receive the vaccine will still get the flu but medical professionals say the vaccination can make the illness less severe and lower the risk of hospitalization.
Sign Up for Fall Clean-Up Assistance

Colorful fall leaves are beautiful to look at but when they start piling up in your yard, it’s time to get to work. Once again, Eras volunteers are available to help clients with fall cleanup at your home.

To receive this service, contact the Eras office in your county. Staff will ask what needs to be done and what tools are available such as rakes, bags, and clippers. "We'll ask you the size of your yard and what supplies you have, and then we'll match you with volunteers that have the tools and supplies needed to get the job done," says Sophia Franklin, director of Eras' Milwaukee County Faith in Action Program.

Volunteers are individuals, families, church groups, youth groups, sports groups and even friend groups. Most work will take place in late October or November once leaves have fallen.

Arrange for Snow Removal Now

It is never too early to start thinking about winter. If you need assistance with snow shoveling during the winter months, now is the time to reach out to Eras to secure volunteer help.

"Snow will be here before you know it," says Sophia Franklin, director of Eras’ Milwaukee County Faith in Action Program. "We can take your requests but please remember, everything is based on volunteer availability. So, it's important to always have a Plan B in place." Please remember clients should have a snow shovel and salt placed outside their home for volunteer use.

There are other free snow shoveling resources in Milwaukee County:
In West Allis, if you are 55+ or have a disability, you can receive help from the Snow Angels, a free neighbor-to-neighbor snow removal assistance program. Snow Angels can be reached at westalliswi.gov/snowangels, or by calling (414) 302-8200.

The City of Milwaukee has a sidewalk snow clearing program for eligible individuals: individuals must be in a single-family home and be physically unable to remove snow from the sidewalk. Call the Snow Hardship Line at (414) 286-3517.

In Milwaukee, Revitalize Milwaukee offers free snow shoveling during the winter months but has a capacity limit; the first 50 homeowners who sign up will receive the services through the winter. To sign up or for more information, call (414) 312-7531.

Contact Eras if you would like a list of paid providers to help with snow removal.
Input Needed About Hospital Discharges

Have you recently been treated and discharged from an area hospital and are at least 60 years of age? If so, researchers would like to talk with you and perhaps your family members who were involved in your care. Findings will be used to better understand the current inpatient discharge process and experience for patients, families, and their providers. A clear understanding of the discharge process is critical to ensuring that the transition from hospital to home or other care setting is safe and accurate.

The study is being conducted by Froedtert and the Medical College of Wisconsin through a partnership with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Eras Senior Network and the Aging & Disability Resource Center of Waukesha County.

Feedback is a critical part of the study and will be used to assess the current discharge process and identify ways that the experience for patients and families can be improved. Your interview, which will be done by telephone or by video call, will be strictly confidential.

Eligible persons must have been discharged within the past 60 days and be age 60+; and family members or friends who provide informal, unpaid support or care to a person age 60+ who was recently discharged from a hospital stay.

For more information, contact Miranda Wenzlaff, MS, CCRP, at (414) 251-5580 or by email at wenzlaff@uwm.edu.

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