

# Decreasing Senior Falls Through Smart Safety!



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**Serious injuries continue to be a topic of discussion in health care as patients, nursing staff, and administration forge forward in trying to ensure patient safety.**

One of the most common forms of injuries are due to falls, which often occur while a person is either hospitalized or living in an assisted care facility.

Basic safety and precautions in medical care are taught at the elementary level of nursing care, so what is going on and what can we do to help decrease the amount of people who are injured through preventative falls?

The Agency for Research and Quality estimates that between 700,000 - 1 million patients fall each year while in the hospital setting (AHRQ, 2018). This number increases for nursing home residents, where it is estimated that almost half of the 1.6 million residents experience a fall on an annual basis. More than one third of these falls result in injuries, with many of them being serious injuries including head trauma and bone fractures.

**What can we do to be safer?**

**Self-Awareness:** Knowing our limitations is the first step, but often one of the most difficult ones. Things we used to be able to do without any issue now require assistance and paying attention to our changing bodies and abilities is important. Using a walker to just get up and go to the bathroom may not have been necessary a week ago, but now things are a bit more unsteady and this assistance could help prevent a major fall. Utilizing handrails and just watching your step can also contribute to safer ambulation.

**Medical Issues:** Many people claim that dizziness was the reason for their fall. When attempting to stand, scoot to the edge of the chair first before standing up immediately. Pay attention to the way you feel and when no light-headedness or spinning occurs, stand up while still bracing the chair. This allows you to sit right back down should you need to.

**Trip Hazards:** Making sure your home is clear of trip hazards also contributes to safety (with rugs, mats, and electrical cords being major culprits). This can be as simple as removing a rug from a floor or tucking cords behind the television. If you should ever barely trip on something that is removable or able to be put somewhere else, do not wait for an actual fall to do it. Preventing the fall can help us to avoid so much unnecessary aggravation and pain!

**Clutter:** Basic clutter is known to be the reason that many people have tripped and something as simple as some trash on the floor can cause us to stumble. Keeping all pathways cleared and clean helps to ensure that we will not have anything in our way to trip over. Keeping a small trash can next to your bed and then one in each room helps to keep things clean and void of clutter. Making sure that all the floors and entryways are cleared of clothing and debris helps to ensure a clear pathway, decreasing the risk for a fall.

**Pets:** While most people in the hospital setting do not have a pet with them, the number of people allowed to have pets in long-term care or as a therapy pet continues to grow. While our darling little furry friends are our pride and joy, they can also be frisky and fast and get in our way at times. A neighbor of mine was walking her Golden Retriever last year and the dog ran around her several times, causing her to lose her balance. She fell and broke her hip and was held up for many months healing. Whether it is hiring someone to help walk your pet or having them trained to not jump (and throw you off balance), making sure that your pet is not a fall hazard requires us to really analyze our situation with them and identify any potential hazards. In my neighbor's case, she no longer walked the dog herself (either having her husband walk her or hiring a neighborhood kid to do the job). While therapy pets are trained quite well, making sure they are trained to *not* run around the feet is still important.

**Broken or Unsteady Chairs:** Having unstable chairs in the home, hospital, or care setting can cause a dangerous fall and most of the time we are given a hint that the chair is uneven and yet we do not put it out of commission (guilty!). We do not want to wait until the chair gives way to either repair or replace it. Having a chair break as we sit in it is a very hard fall and can almost ensure some kind of injury (although let's just hope it's of the pride nature). As soon as you are able to tell that a specific chair is off balance or feels unsteady in any way, take it out of commission until you can have someone look at it. If it does not look like it can be repaired well, replace it. The cost of a chair is much less than the cost of a fracture.

**Ask For Help:** If you are in an inpatient setting and the staff has put you on fall precautions (which is pretty much everyone these days), ring that buzzer when needing to go to the bathroom or wanting to transfer from a bed to a chair. Staff is there to help you and if you are on precautions, they are aware that you may be calling them for assistance.

**By paying attention to the different areas in which we can *prevent* falls, so much can be avoided!** While nurses and staffing in healthcare facilities continue to try and make the setting a safer place, there is still a lot we can do to help ourselves. Most of us have experienced a bad fall at some point in our life and it is easy to look back at it after the fact and see where we could have been safer. Remember, prevention is the key!

References:

Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. (2018). *US Department of Health and Human Services*. Retrieved on 11 May 2019 from: <https://www.ahrq.gov/topics/falls-prevention.html>

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