

Volunteer Leader Training Guide

Strategies for Senior Adults in Reducing the Risk of Falls

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Target Audience

- EHC members
- Adult audiences

Objectives

- Participants will learn about the hazards of falling.
- Participants will be able to identify risk factors for falls.
- Participants will learn strategies for fall prevention.

Main Teaching Point

Falls and accidents seldom just happen. The more assertive you are in fall prevention, the more likely you will be to lower your chances of falling. Three strategies for fall prevention are:

- Strengthen your body.
- Fix environmental hazards.
- Use your mind.

Lesson Material

- Leader Training Guide
- PowerPoint: Fall Prevention – Three Strategies for Seniors in Reducing the Risk of Falls – Lesson Script in PowerPoint Notes
- Handout: Strategies for Seniors to Reduce the Risk of Falls – A General Safety and Home Fall Prevention Checklist for Older Adults

Introduction

Each year thousands of older adults fall. Many of these individuals are seriously injured or disabled, some die. Falls are often due to environmental hazards that are easy to fix but are often overlooked – such as tripping over an electrical cord. Falls are also often due to changes as we age. Our physical abilities are reduced, and certain tasks such as stretching, lifting and bending become more difficult. We must counteract this decline with purposeful exercise. Furthermore, falls can occur due to lack of judgment. We must think before we walk, step, jump, run, turn or dance. Check for safety and then proceed. Don't let the fear of falling keep you from living.

Suggestions for Teaching

The Hazards of Falling

A fall is when a person unintentionally and suddenly comes to rest at some lower level of gravity. Fear of falling is one of the strongest causes of restrictive activity in senior adults. By reducing the risk, we can hopefully reduce the fear, thus staying active longer.

Here are some general background statistics on falls. Three-fourths of deaths due to falls each year occur in individuals over age 65. One-third of individuals over the age of 65 will fall each year. Ninety percent of the 300,000 hip fractures treated annually in the U.S. occur as a result of a fall. In the year 2000, there were more than 350,000 fractures, that's nearly 1,000 hip fractures a day. Approximately 25 percent of hip fracture patients will make a full recovery; 40 percent will require nursing home admission; 50 percent will be dependent upon a cane or a walker; and 20 percent will die in one year. These numbers show the importance of fall prevention.

Risk Factors for Falls

Physical health is one reason senior adults fall. Several potential health-related causes of falling include balance disorders, accidents, dizziness, confusion, visual impairment, orthostatic hypotension, abnormal gait, muscle weakness, poor balance, ADL impairment, multiple medications, postural hypotension and syncope. This is by no means an all-inclusive list, but often a single cause for falls cannot be determined. They are multi-factorial. Research has shown that with increasing numbers of risk factors, the incidence of falling increases.

Even so, gait and balance problems appear to be the leading risk factors for falling. Some reasons for the age-related changes in gait are not picking up feet as high, the tendency to gradually develop a flexed posture (we get rigid) and our slowed righting reflex to postural changes such as a shove or trip (we don't automatically correct ourselves as fast).

The structure and objects in our environment are another potential cause of falling. Sixty percent of falls occur in homes, 30 percent of falls occur in communities and 10 percent occur in nursing homes or other institutions. Most fractures result from a fall in a home and are usually related to everyday activities such as walking on stairs, going to the bathroom or working in the kitchen. About 25 percent of all falls are the result of hazards such as slippery or wet surfaces, poor lighting, inadequate footwear and cluttered pathways. Many of these falls due to environmental hazards are easy to fix but are often overlooked.

Strategies for Fall Prevention

As research has shown, multiple factors are often involved in a person falling. Therefore, we should use multiple strategies to reduce the risk of falling. This lesson focuses on three strategies: strengthen your body, modify the environment and use your mind or plan ahead.

Strengthen Your Body – The first step in fall prevention is to strengthen your body and improve your balance. By improving your strength and flexibility, you will reduce your risk of falling. Researchers agree that walking is one of the best exercises a person can do. Walking helps improve your strength and balance, thus improving your gait. You can modify your walking to work different muscles and improve your balance. For example, you can practice tandem walking or just walk backwards. Other good exercises include toe raises, leg extensions, side leg raises, hamstring curls and modified squats.

Modify the Environment – The second fall prevention strategy is modifying the environment. You need to fix any potential environmental hazards. Take a minute and think about your house. Can you think of anything that might be a fall hazard? Use the **Strategies for Seniors in Reducing the Risk of Falls – A General Safety and Home Fall Prevention Checklist for Older Adults** to go through the potential hazards in your home.

If you find that your home does need changes in order to make it safe, you may want or need to hire a home repair contractor or handyman. It is important to select a reputable contractor. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Ask friends to recommend repair contractors.
2. Get at least three written estimates for the project. Most contractors give free estimates.
3. Ask for and check references.
4. If licensing is required in your area, ask to see the contractor's license. Also ask for proof of insurance and bonding.
5. Do not pay the contractor in full before the work is done. Some contractors will ask for a small down payment, which is permissible.
6. Get a signed written agreement before work begins or money is exchanged. The agreement should specify both the work and payment schedule as well as when the work will be completed.
7. Do not make the final payment until the project has been done to your satisfaction.
8. Check with the Better Business Bureau or the attorney general's office if you have questions or complaints about a contractor and you were unable to rectify the disagreement or problem with the contractor.

Use Your Mind – Finally, the third fall prevention strategy is to “use your mind” and plan your next move. Think before you act and make adjustments in advance. Is that box too heavy and awkward for you to try to carry? Think about it. If it is, then don't. Use a dolly or ask for help. It is not worth falling. If you are not at your home, look at the ground or floor before you walk over it. Is it uneven, wet, covered in ice or slippery in any way? Then don't walk over it. If you must, then ask someone to help you. Also, don't be embarrassed to use a walking stick, cane or walker. A moment of embarrassment is worth not ending up in the hospital.

Another thing you can do to prevent falls is to wear sturdy shoes with thin, non-slip soles. You should avoid slippers that your feet can slip out of and large running shoes with extra thick soles – you could turn an ankle. Be sure the shoes are the correct size and width for your feet. Shoe size can and usually does change as we age. So you may consider having your foot measured the next time you go to buy shoes.

If you are building or remodeling a home, think about what you want now and what you may need later on. Consider the abilities of the people in your home, both now and in the future. Think about and use features that are helpful to everyone. The size and shape of the room design should be large enough for a person to approach, reach, manipulate and use the features of the room regardless of the person's body size, posture or mobility. (For example, if in a wheelchair, you should still be able to reach the light switch and sit at the dining table.) A home should be livable without large amounts of physical effort. For example, at least one bedroom and one bathroom should be on the first floor of a two-story house, and those rooms should be wheelchair accessible.

If remodeling or building a new home, keep in mind features of perceptible information which allow communication and ability of usage in the home regardless of a person's sensory abilities. For example, not only does the doorbell ring, it also flashes a light in the house. Or, dual height rods and shelves are installed in closets to accommodate different heights or reaching abilities. Think about equitable use in your home. The design should not be disadvantageous or stigmatize any group of users. Safety features can be stylish.

Summary

Three main strategies for fall prevention:

- Strengthen your body. Exercise. Keep your body strong. Work on increasing your balance and flexibility. Most of all, walk.
- Modify the environment. Go through **Strategies for Seniors in Reducing the Risk of Falls – A General Safety and Home Fall Prevention Checklist for Older Adults** and see what changes need to be made in your home; then do them.
- Use your mind. Think. Plan ahead. Prevent falls.