



(Editor: Please note the sidebar at the end of the article. It would be nice to pull that out into a box to give it a little more emphasis. Thanks.)

Public Health column for Independent Record

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Falls Not an Inevitable Part of Aging

**By Melanie Reynolds
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“Help, I’ve fallen and I can’t get up!”

That plea from a long-running TV commercial probably rings a bell. It plays on a fear shared by many older adults: the fear of falling.

It’s a fear that can keep seniors from walking, shopping, and taking part in social activities. It can lead to poor physical health. And, ironically, it can increase the chances of falling.

Every year, millions of Americans age 65 or older fall – about one in every four. Falls are the leading cause of fatal injuries in this age group. They kill about 27,000 seniors a year.

The good news is, falls are not a normal part of aging (though the risks do increase with age). Many falls are linked to medical conditions and safety hazards in the living environment. These can be prevented.

Staying active and exercising to improve balance, flexibility, and strength can help. So can taking steps to make your home safer, since more than half of all falls occur at home.

If you’re not worried about falling, you might have an aging parent, grandparent, or neighbor who does. You can help them live longer and better by showing them how to reduce their risks.

The High Cost of Falling

Some falls are more embarrassing than harmful, but about a fifth cause serious injuries, like broken bones and head injuries. These threaten seniors’ ability to enjoy life, care for themselves, and live independently.

In addition to hurting quality of life, falls take a monumental monetary toll. The *Journal of Safety Research* estimated recently that the direct medical costs related to falls in 2015 were more than \$32 billion. The cost is likely to grow along with the aging population.

Given Montana's icy climate, you may not be surprised to learn that our state ranked fifth in the nation for its fall rate in 2014. About a third of older Montanans (32%) reported falling that year, compared to 29% of older Americans.

In Lewis and Clark County, falls send people to the emergency room more than any other kind of unintentional injury, according to the 2015 Community Health Report.

We can't control the weather, but there are plenty of risk factors we can control. A good place to start is to "fall proof" your home.

'Fall Proof' Your Home

Six of every 10 falls happen at home. Many could be prevented by making these simple changes:

- Remove anything that could cause you to trip or slip, like small furniture, clutter, electrical cords, and throw rugs. Be sure to keep stairs and hallways clear.
- Put non-slip strips on floors, steps, and the floor of your bath or shower. You can buy these at home centers and hardware stores.
- Keep floors dry, and clean up spills right away.
- Make sure you have good lighting, inside and out. Use bulbs that have the highest wattage recommended for the fixture. Put night lights in the bathroom, hallways, bedroom, and kitchen.
- Keep a flashlight by your bed in case the power goes out.
- Install handrails on both sides of stairs and walkways. If you're carrying something, keep one hand on the rail and make sure you can see your feet.
- Get sturdy grab bars installed in your tub or shower and next to your toilet.
- Keep items you use often in places you can reach easily.

Make Personal Changes

Many falls result from personal or lifestyle factors that you can change. Others stem from issues related to aging, but even these often can be managed to reduce falling risks.

More than 90 percent of older adults have at least one chronic disease, like diabetes, stroke, or arthritis. These can cause a loss in function, inactivity, depression, or pain.

Seniors also may take prescriptions or over-the-counter medications that can cause dizziness. Changes in vision as we age can make it harder to see tripping hazards, and bone loss can cause weakness and a greater risk of fractures.

Here are some ways to address these and other personal issues:

- **Talk to your doctor.** At your next medical checkup, talk to your doctor about your risk of falling. Be sure to let him or her know if you have fallen.

- **Be physically active.** Regular exercise is the first line of defense against falls and fractures. Your doctor can suggest an exercise program that strengthens bones and muscles and improves balance and flexibility. There are also classes available in the community (see sidebar).
- **Review your medicines regularly.** Ask your doctor about the possible side effects of medicines you take. Some may affect your coordination or balance or cause dizziness or sleepiness. (But remember, never stop taking any medications without talking to your doctor first.)
- **Have your blood pressure checked while lying down and standing.** Some people find that their blood pressure drops too much when they stand up. This can cause you to feel faint and unsteady.
- **Get regular eye checkups.** Even small changes in vision can make you less stable, so see an eye doctor at least once a year. If you wear glasses, make sure the prescription is current, keep them clean, and wear them regularly. Avoid wearing reading glasses or multi-focals while walking or taking stairs because they can distort your depth perception.
- **Limit use of alcohol.** Even a small amount of alcohol can affect balance and reflexes. And heavy drinking can weaken bones so they're more likely to break if you fall.
- **Wear safe footwear.** Wear sensible, low-heeled shoes that fit well and support your feet. Choose shoes with non-slip soles. Avoid wearing only socks, floppy slippers, or shoes without backs.
- **Consider assistive devices.** These include canes, walkers, and reachers. When properly fitted to you, they can stabilize you. A reacher can eliminate the need to stand on stools or bend down to pick up something.

For more information about preventing falls, visit the National Institute on Aging website at www.nihseniorhealth.gov/falls

Sidebar

Lewis and Clark Public Health is offering free classes to teach skills related to fall prevention, as well as exercise, medication management, nutrition, and communication. The six short sessions, called Living Life Well, will start Jan. 17. Call us at 457-8900 to reserve a spot.

Rocky Mountain Development Council (RMDC) offers a fall prevention program that is proven to reduce falls among seniors. It's called "Stepping On," and it's free to people 60 or older who have fallen or are afraid of falling.

Participants attend seven weekly hour-and-a-half sessions that include low-impact balance and strength exercises and discussions of strategies to prevent falls. To learn more about "Stepping On," call RMDC at 447-1680.