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What you learn about PT and falls could make a critical difference

By Bob Cairo | Special to the Coastal Point
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Falls are the leading cause of emergency department visits, hospital admissions and accidental death for people 65 or older, and they can impact quality of life. Reducing the risk of falls can literally save a life.

Falls have been labeled a national health priority for the last few years. There's just no way I can sugarcoat just how serious a matter this is, and especially for those of us age 65 or older. The reason is that falls are a major cause of serious injury and even death. What should also concern you is that falls can have a direct impact on your quality of life. In one swoop, your health and independence can be taken away.

Falls are the leading cause of emergency department visits, hospital admissions and accidental death for people 65 or older, according to many medical professionals and research studies. In fact, these statistics from the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) should give you food for thought.

The CDC tells us that 1 out of every 5 falls result in a serious injury, including head injuries and broken bones. Other research reveals that 1 in 3 people 65 or older will have at least one fall a year. For older people, the number of falls per year goes up.

Now, consider this. Falls are the most common cause of traumatic brain injury. And what should really make you think is that researchers and medical experts agree that incidents involving falls are likely undercounted, because many falls go unreported every year.

Now, let's look at the other side of this picture. This goes directly to your quality of life. Researchers have found that the fear of falling has a big impact on the quality of life for many of us of a certain age. It leads to a greater degree of isolation, because that fear often makes people less likely to go out and even winds up

causing self-limiting of the time spent with friends and family. I don't think it's a real surprise for you to connect the dots and realize how this can really diminish quality of life.

Given the implications, I wanted to spend this time with you to talk about the factors that can lead to falls and what you can do to prevent them.

Falls occur for all kinds of reasons, and it's a lot more complicated than you may think. Balance and weakness in either or both legs are common fall risk factors for many older adults. Using a cane or walker can sometimes lead to a fall from something as simple as getting caught on a rug or even misjudging the space you have to get through when moving from one place to another.

While we're talking about legs, let's also talk about your feet. If your shoes don't fit properly, they can cause you to fall. What about your laces? Seems so simple, doesn't it? But untied laces can make you trip and fall, too.

Another potential cause of falls is a vision problem. So, I'm going to stop right here and say that if you have been ignoring failing eyesight, you are setting yourself up for a fall. And let me remind you to think about what happens when you get new glasses. They require an adjustment period, too. Be extra careful, because it takes just one misstep to cause a fall.

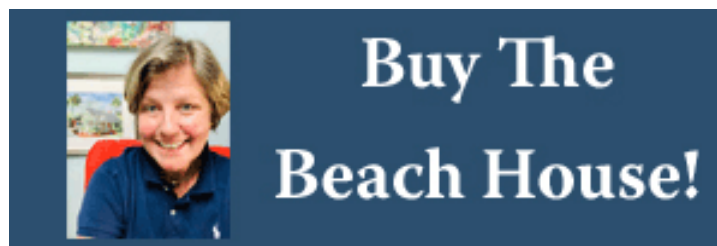
Another serious risk factor can be your medications. If you're taking multiple medications, it can lead to dizziness and weakness. Antidepressants and sedatives come to mind, too, because they can lessen your focus. Obviously, you need to take your medication, but you have to be aware of what you are doing at all times knowing the risk of falling.

You also want to think about your living environment. There are so many factors that we don't think about on a daily basis, and that's a recipe for potential trouble. If you have rugs or scatter rugs and runners in your house, are they secure? You need to be sure they aren't going to slide and cause you to fall.

Some people will put magazines down next to their chair to save it for later. Not a good idea. What about the chair you sit in? If that chair isn't steady, it can tip and you're on the floor. Now, how about that best fur buddy? We love our dogs and cats, but we need to be aware that when they come up to snuggle or walk around our legs, we have to pay attention to avoid a fall.

Preventing falls begins with the most important step — no pun intended — that I talk with you about all the time. Remember that old saying about an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure? Nothing could be truer when it comes to fall prevention.

Start by seeing your doctor. Your doctor can evaluate all the critical factors including your medical history and the medicines you take.



Before you make an appointment with your medical professional, remember one of my big rules: Write down your history, including whether you have fallen before, and what medicines and vitamins or other supplements you are taking.

Your doctor may very well decide to have you see a physical therapist. Rest assured that your therapist and doctor will keep communicating as you work through your program to get you the best possible results.

When you meet with your physical therapist, the focus will be on designing a program to improve your balance and strength. Your first visit will likely include a thorough evaluation that may feature an assessment of your range of motion and the strength of your legs.

As you know from our visits here in the Coastal Point, I also include an in-depth conversation. I want to know what your concerns are. I want to hear about whether you have fallen before, whether you have any issues with balance or walking in general. I also want to talk about goals.

You can expect your physical therapist will likely put together a program that will have a variety of elements. It may include an exercise program, because exercise has proven to be effective in preventing falls. The program can include balance training to help you become steadier on your feet. It might also include core strengthening, which builds muscles that can help stability.

Another feature of your customized program may be strength training that works on both of your legs. It may also include strength training for your musculature that impacts posture. Depending on your personal situation, you may also get value from aerobic exercises, which have the added benefit of improving your general overall health.

Don't be surprised if your physical therapist asks you to review your daily activities and talk about your environment. The goal here is to find out if there are practical ways to improve your safety.

Maybe the addition of hand railings might help near stairs or even your outside stairs. There might be a discussion of adding them in your bathroom. Maybe securing a throw rug with some double-backed tape could solve a potential fall

risk. It could also be that changing how you get up from a chair or how you get out of bed could make your environment safer.

The last part of your customized program may be a home exercise plan. If that's the case, you can expect you will be given exercise information to guide you on how to do these exercises. It is likely that the program will be designed to be done on a regular basis to help you build your strength and balance, and that means lessening the risk of falling.

The pieces of your program will fit together like a crossword puzzle. Each piece is part of a whole. The point is that they work together to address your challenges. We know that when you increase your strength and balance along with your daily activity level, you're decreasing the risk of falls.

The bonus is that you will be gaining another big advantage because you also lessen the chance of suffering from a variety of other health problems, such as arthritis, high blood pressure and heart disease. If you have some of those health problems already, improving your strength and stamina and adding activity will work to help you better address those issues, too. So, no matter how you look at it, you're giving yourself a big gift.

Acting to lessen your risk of falling could literally save your life. So, get going.

Call your healthcare provider and get on track. Every day is another chance to live a happier healthier life, and I'm rooting for you.

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