

Protecting Your Elderly Parents from Falls

Part of a series on how to care for your aging parents.

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As Consumer Reports notes, half of Americans older than 65 will fall this year. Those over 80 are most at risk.¹

Up to 30% of seniors that take a spill suffer “moderate” or “serious” injuries, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Some will even die as a result of a brain hemorrhage, a broken neck, or ensuing medical problems such as brain trauma or pneumonia linked to blood clots after a hip fracture.^{1,2}

Can you tell if your Mom or Dad is especially susceptible to a fall? There are two routine tests that may help you and your parent predict future fall risk.

One is the Functional Reach Test, in which you stand with your feet shoulder width apart or narrower, extend one arm out front at shoulder height, and reach forward as far as possible with that arm without falling. If Mom or Dad can’t reach forward more than 7” from that initial position, they are at definite risk for falls.¹

The Get Up & Go Test is also a predictive indicator. In this test, Mom or Dad sits in an armless chair, rises and walks 10’ straight ahead, makes a U-turn, and then walks back to the chair and sits. If this takes more than 14 seconds, Mom or Dad is at considerable fall risk.¹

Even without those tests, a senior with an off-balance gait or the inability to stand on one foot for at least half a minute faces sizable fall risk.¹

Can you teach your Mom or Dad to guard against a fall? Yes you can, though you may not be able to mitigate the behavioral or medical factors that lead to falling.

Some physical conditions lead to falls: poor vision, poor balance, and impairment due to strokes or arthritis, even a Vitamin B¹² deficiency or low blood pressure. Some medications (or more properly, their side effects) can contribute to the problem.¹

All that said, most falls can be traced to gait problems and balance problems. So improving gait and balance is the goal.

Ever wonder why there are so many *tai chi* classes at senior centers? Seniors practicing the Chinese martial art can improve their balance and lower their odds of falling – a 2012 study in

the *New England Journal of Medicine* affirmed that. Other group exercise programs and physical therapy may help seniors strengthen muscles and improve coordination.²

Can Mom or Dad do some preventive exercises at home? Of course. Three that seem to help are all fairly simple. They can practice standing on one foot (with a spotter), they can hold onto the back of a chair and do leg lifts, and they can consciously do some heel-to-toe walking.¹

When is it time for a cane or a walker? Many older people are reluctant to use them, seeing them as symbols of weakness and dependence. In reality, they are smart choices that affirm the safety of the senior and help him or her maintain ambulatory independence.³

For help answering this question, you and/or your parent should visit a physical therapist for a balance assessment, where one or both of the aforementioned tests may be used to predict the chances of fall risk. The PT may recommend a walker if the risk is great, a cane if the risk is relatively minor. Not all canes are alike, and neither are all walkers. Some are sportier than the rote, institutional-looking models. Some are taller, some are shorter, some have different bases and some have different grips. Mom or Dad should have the opportunity to try a few models out, perhaps in a medical supply store.³

How can you make Mom or Dad's home safer? You can take little steps such as getting rid of rugs that could snag a walker or cane, clutter on or near the floor and narrow passages between furniture. They should have space to maneuver within a room, and grab bars or railings to help them as they enter or exit a room, a toilet seat, or a bath are handy. A sturdy shower seat or transfer bench may be needed, even a "European style" bathtub with a door that opens nearly at floor level. Interior designers know that seniors want style, not a house that looks like a hospital or a municipal building – so these days, safeguards such as these may be installed with style, although the more style you want the more it will cost.

Your concern & gentle encouragement might keep Mom or Dad on their feet longer. If you worry about your Mom or Dad falling, act on that worry. Discuss the matter, in a loving and caring way.



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Citations.

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