

Risking a fall: Tier seniors face most danger

NANCY YOUNG, Correspondent 12:10 p.m. EST February 1, 2015



(Photo: Provided photo)

The nine women start in a big circle. Peaceful music plays in the gym. They take deliberate steps to meet at the center, all while doing a Tai Chi motion where they imagine they are holding a ball, shifting which hand is on top.

At the crowded center, they wind their way around each other. One lowers her hands — drops the ball, so to speak — and takes a couple of nimble steps to skip past Sue Stella, their instructor, who jokes, "Joan's cheating!"

A giggle moves through the group, but they keep their balance.

Joan Ackerman, 86, looked gleeful that she was caught skipping in the Moving for Better Balance class in the Highland Park gym in Endwell. A few years back, the Tioga County resident broke both her hips in a couple of falls.

"My hips just gave way," said Ackerman, who has osteoporosis. This is the third time she has been through the 12-week exercise course put on by the YMCA of Broome County and she plans to keep going because she feels much more solid on her feet now. "I have to keep at it."

As the Southern Tier's population ages, the issue of fall prevention is front and center for many communities. Anyone, any age, can fall and hurt themselves, particularly during icy winter weather. But the risk and consequences increase as we age when even a relatively minor fall can lead to a loss of independence — either because of physical injury or because the fear of future falls keep people from getting out and getting around. They become physically weaker and more socially isolated.

"Falls are such a great cause of injuries and hospitalizations," said Pamela Brown, director of the Chemung County Department of Aging and Long Term Care. "But the thing about falls is, for the most part, they are preventable."

Risk to seniors

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a third of Americans over age 65 fall each year. Falls are the leading cause of fatal and nonfatal injuries in that age group. In 2013, older adults in the U.S. made about 2.5 million emergency department visits due to falls, with 734,000 of these visits leading to hospitalization.

Closer to home, falls account for about 14 percent of ambulance calls in Tompkins County, the largest single cause, according to the Tompkins Fall Prevention Coalition, a joint initiative of six county organizations, funded by a grant by the Health Foundation for Western and Central New York.

The typical call for help involves a woman "probably in her 80s, who fell in her own house, in her living room in the afternoon," said Beth Harrington, a member of the coalition and emergency medical services coordinator and assistant director at Tompkins County Emergency Response. The study found the biggest cause of falls in the home was people tripping on scatter or throw rugs.

"I wouldn't say most of the injuries are life threatening — at least not immediately," Harrington said. But, falls threaten lives more than just in the immediate aftermath, she added. "It's always very sad to me to see when it is someone who is a wonderfully independent 80- or 90-year-old who has fallen" and to know that maybe that independence is about to end.

On ambulance calls sparked by falls, EMS workers in Tompkins County will offer the clients information on falls, including referrals to organizations that can do home safety checks or offer exercise classes for seniors. They even have given out night lights — since poor lighting is a significant cause of falls, Harrington said.

Exercise, balance classes

One of the best ways to prevent falls is to exercise and to stay as strong as possible so you can adjust to whatever bumps in the road life puts in your way.

"They say, 'Put it in a pill and everyone would be taking it,'" Brown said of the benefits of exercise.

At first this may seem counter intuitive to seniors who often end up in a vicious cycle. As they age, they may get physically weaker and feel unsteady on their feet. To prevent falls — a major worry among older folks — they stop moving around so much and get weaker still.

•Have a home safety check done to look for potential tripping hazards and poor lighting.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Falls in the region

Here's a look at falls and hospitalization rates for Southern Tier residents 65 and older.

Chemung County

Annual number of falls each year for those 65 and older:295

Hospital admissions each year from falls: 205.7 per 10,000 residents 65 and older

Broome County

Annual number of falls each year for those 65 and older: 842

Hospital admissions each year from falls: 248.8 per 10,000 residents 65 and older

Schuyler County

Annual number of falls each year for those 65 and older: 60

Hospital admissions each year from falls: 180.8 per 10,000 residents 65 and older

Steuben County

Annual number of falls each year for those 65 and older: 241

Hospital admissions each year from falls: 145.4 per 10,000 residents 65 and older

Tioga County

Annual number of falls each year for those 65 and older: 76 **Hospital admissions each year from falls:** 89.5 per 10,000 residents 65 and older

Tompkins County

Annual number of falls each year for those 65 and older: 209

Hospital admissions each year from falls: 177.2 per 10,000 residents 65 and older

Chenango County

Annual number of falls each year for those 65 and older: 142

Hospital admissions each year from falls: 167.8 per 10,000 residents 65 and older

Southern Tier

Annual number of falls each year for those 65 and older: 1,472

Hospital admissions each year from falls: 201.9 per 10,000 residents 65 and older

Source: New York State Health Department. Data is from 2013, the most current year available for comparison between counties.

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