

By Amy Neff Roth

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Tumbles can lead to many problems for seniors

For a senior, a fall can mean a lot more than some nasty bruises.

It can be a symptom of an underlying medical condition or medication problem. And it can be the cause of an injury that starts a downward spiral.

"Falls very often lead to broken bones, hip replacements. And any time anyone is hospitalized, but certainly older folks, it leads to periods of immobility," said Amber Slichta, vice president of the Health Foundation for Western and Central New York, which spent several years building community coalitions, including one in Herkimer County, to address fall prevention.

"And the older people get, the harder it is to recover. And certainly in addition to broken bones, a whole host of traumatic injuries can occur, even death," she said.

People 65 and older often don't fully recover and end up needing assistance at home or moving into a nursing home, Slichta said. Even harmless falls can cause long-term problems if seniors lose their confidence and start moving less, she said.

Every day falls kill two older New Yorkers, send 225 to an emergency room for treatment and lead to hospitalization for 140, according to the New York State Department of Health.

As an outgrowth of the recent White House Conference on Aging, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has launched an educational campaign – Stopping Elderly Accidents, Deaths & Injuries – to get doctors more involved in assessing older patients for fall risk and in advising them on how to prevent falls. The CDC recommends medication checks, vision checks, home safety checks and exercise.

Medication always is the first thing he checks when patients are at risk for falls, said Dr. Douglas DeLong, division chief of general internal medicine at Bassett Medical Center in Cooperstown. Side effects and interactions can throw seniors off balance or make them lightheaded.

Other potential problems include: blood pressure that changes when patients stand or lie down, vision changes, degenerative joint disease, peripheral neuropathy (which means patients' feet can't feel) and poor balance from weakness caused by deconditioning or a past stroke, he said.

Evidence has proven only one really effective way to lower the risk of falling – tai chi – although there is some evidence that vitamin D supplementation might help, DeLong said.

Dr. Martin Tolentino, chief resident at the Mohawk Valley Health System's Sister Rose Vincent Family Medicine Center in Utica, said he's concerned that with all the attention on seniors, doctors won't catch younger adults at risk for falls.

"I look at my patients who have diabetes, for example," he said. "They have neuropathy. Their lower extremities are numb. It doesn't give them the right feedback for where their feet are. It's easy to be off balance. That's just one example."

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How to prevent falls

* Do exercises, such as Tai Chi, that help improve balance and strength.* Get your doctor to review your medications, including over-the-counter drugs, for side effects or interactions that could put you at risk for falls.* Get your vision checked.* Get rid of trip hazards in your home, including throw rugs that aren't taped to the floor.* Keep regularly used items in cabinets you can reach without * stepstool. * Put grab bars in the tub and next to the toilet. Use non-slip mats in the tub and on the shower floor.* Keep your lighting bright.* Hang lightweight curtains or shades to reduce glare.* Install handrails and lights on stairs.* Wear shoes, not slippers, indoors and out. Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention