

Growing Old, Staying Safe

Published in *The Lakeville Journal*, May 15, 2008

Living Well

A column from SVNA by Cyd Emmons

No matter what your age, you've undoubtedly taken a tumble more than once. Trips, slips and falls happen to all of us—occasionally. If you're age 65 or older, though, your odds of falling increase dramatically.

While most of these falls don't cause serious harm, you can't count on picking yourself up, dusting yourself off and going on your merry way every time. In fact, according to the Mayo Clinic, the leading cause of injury and injury-related death in older adults is falling.

Joyce Ferrentino, a physical therapist, and Terri Zucker, an occupational therapist, both of whom work for Salisbury Visiting Nurse Association, are a two-woman SWAT team when it comes to falls. They often work together in helping a patient recover from the results of a fall, but a good part of their mission is helping patients avoid falling in the first place.

"A lot of people aren't aware that the medications they take can lead to a fall," Ms Ferrentino said. "Blood pressure medication and psychotropic drugs, such as antidepressants, can cause light-headedness, dizziness and vertigo." While cautioning patients to continue taking all prescribed medications, she suggests that those who have experienced such side effects talk to their doctors about alternatives.

Staying strong and in shape through regular exercise is another tip. "Strength, balance, coordination and flexibility" are the keys, according to Ms. Ferrentino. Walking is always good, and those who want to go further might seek out an organized exercise program, such as the "Break Your Falls" series of classes offered at no charge through SVNA periodically. Or, she said, those who want to stay in shape can consult a physical therapist who will assess individual needs and design an exercise program for the patient to do at home.

Whether out doing all that healthy walking or at home, sensible and appropriate shoes should trump fashion. "Good supportive footwear, no open backs or open toes or little heels, especially if your balance is impaired" is Ms. Ferrentino's prescription.

"And footwear should be appropriate to the environment," Ms. Zucker added. Heavily-treaded running shoes can catch on carpeting," she noted, and slippers, comfortable as they are, can present a hazard, too. They slip.

The first thing either of the therapists do when visiting a new patient is a safety check of the home. "Scatter rugs are the worst, and carpeting with loose edges," Ms. Zucker said. "I travel with double-stick tape. It takes care of loose edges and doesn't ruin the floor." Their goal is to control clutter, Ms. Ferrentino continued. "You want a clear pathway

with nothing on the floor, nothing stored on the staircase and no extension cords to trip over."

Good lighting is another vital element in creating a safe home environment, especially as its inhabitants age. "We need more light as we get older," Ms. Zucker pointed out, adding that people sometimes fall simply because they can't see where they're going, especially when getting up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom. In addition to good lighting throughout the house with clear paths to light switches, both suggested strategically located nightlights, a light on the bedside table and a flashlight beside the bed, too.

Rushing to answer the phone frequently results in a fall, Ms. Zucker said. She suggests having a cordless phone that you keep with you. "I try to get my patients to wear an apron so they can carry their phones with them." She also suggested a simple to operate answering machine, with large, easy to see buttons so there's no need to rush to the phone. Always, though, Ms. Ferrentino cautioned, "Get up slowly. You need time to gain your equilibrium."

Beloved pets can sometimes inadvertently present a hazard, too. "We'd never try to get someone to give up a pet," Ms. Ferrentino said, but they can pose a problem. The best solution is an enclosure where a dog can be let out rather than walking him on a leash, unless he is extremely well-trained and doesn't pull. Ms. Zucker suggested putting the pet's food and water on a low table or other surface off the floor to avoid having to bend over too far.

Bathrooms are notorious problem areas so grab bars by the toilet and in the shower are real necessities, "I think that's a good idea for everybody," Ms. Zucker said. She also suggested using a shower stool with a hand-held showerhead rather than standing to bathe.

Often, the simplest solution is the best. "Have a handle installed near exterior doors so you can steady yourself going in and out" is Ms. Ferrentino's suggestion. "I sometimes re-arrange my patient's dresser drawers or kitchen cabinets," Ms. Zucker said. "It makes sense to have the things you use most often in the drawers or on shelves that are easiest to get to and the things you rarely use in those that are harder to reach."