

The Fear of Falling

OSF HealthCare Newsroom

Shelli Dankoff – Media Relations Program Manager

As we age, aches and pains may seem greater and you may find you have to force yourself to exercise or simply keep moving. But as we get older doing just that becomes increasingly important because it may help you prevent falls.

A [study](#) recently published in JAMA, the journal of the American Medical Association, found that for people over 75, the number of those who died from falls more than doubled from 2000 to 2016. The lead author said one of the reasons for the increase is because people are living longer, particularly with conditions they might have died from years ago.

Mike Holloway is a physical therapist with Peoria, Illinois-based OSF HealthCare. He says he was not surprised by the study's findings, although the increased rate of deaths was a bit alarming. Holloway says one area of concern is older people who break their hips, since that is a core area for balance and walking.

SOT Mike Holloway, Physical Therapist – OSF HealthCare

(Once you break a hip those muscles have already been weak - that may have caused some of the falls, the fact you had weakness in your hips, you trip. There're a lot of studies showing within the first six months after a hip fracture your mortality rate increases significantly because these people aren't getting up and moving and then they develop things like pneumonia or get sick from another reason. So it's very important that we stress early mobility and getting back to exercising and just activity. :28)

Holloway says there are a number of reasons that increase our risk of falling as we get older: we naturally become weaker as we age if we don't exercise; our balance becomes less stable; our vision gets worse; sensors in our feet are less responsive; and, we can develop issues with our inner ears which affects our equilibrium.

Holloway says it's important to resist the inclination to lay down and rest if you aren't feeling well or after a fall, after being checked by a medical professional to make sure you weren't seriously injured.

SOT Mike Holloway, Physical Therapist – OSF HealthCare

(You get a little weaker when you lay down your endurance goes down within a couple days - they've shown that. So the best thing you can do is, within pain levels, you should get up and move as much as you can. Seek out some physical therapy, seek out some people that can give you some exercises, and work on your balance and just get moving again. I break it down pretty easy - the more you move, the better and as long as you're feeling comfortable you should move. :25)

Some of the best exercises to keep your muscles in good working order as you age include hip strengthening exercises, like hip abductions and high-step marching in place; lower leg stretches, such as standing up on your toes and back on your heels; standing and lowering yourself into and out of a straight back chair in a controlled manner; squats; and working on your balance by standing with your eyes closed. All of these can and should be done using the back of a chair for support and balance.

Holloway also says there are simple things to help us keep our balance while walking – if we are willing to swallow our pride and make use of them if necessary.

SOT Mike Holloway, Physical Therapist – OSF HealthCare

(We have devices such as canes, walkers, walking sticks, that we have available to us if we're not too stubborn that we can use appropriately. Sometimes you might need some training on that or education on that. I always tell people if a rail is there, use it. There's no reason not to use it unless your hands are full. What we want to do is decrease those risks. That's what falling is all about is decreasing your risk. Everyone is at a risk to fall but certain people are at a higher risk. :25)

Another thing to keep in mind, particularly when it comes to dealing with aging family members, is to ask them regularly not only if they have fallen, but also if they have had a loss of balance or an increase in trips or stumbles. Those can be a sign of a potential problem.

You should also look around the home and keep throw rugs or other potential tripping hazards to a minimum. Bathrooms are the biggest areas where falls occur. Install grab bars in the shower and near the toilet if necessary.

Learn more about safe ways to [exercise](#) as you get older and take a [senior fitness quiz](#).