

Seniors can fend off fear of falling

Fear can prevent us from doing many things—public speaking, skydiving, rollercoaster riding—but what about fear inhibiting our movement in our own homes or causing us to avoid stepping out into our driveways?

The fear of falling keeps many seniors from being as active as they would like to be, and for good reason: One-third of people over age 65 fall each year. Did you know that 90% of the hip fractures that occur each year in the U.S. result from falls? And of those who do fracture their hip, 40% will have to visit a nursing home, half will have to use a cane or walker, and 20% will die within one year. These statistics are enough to make anyone want to stay put in his or her easy chair.

Are you at risk for a fall? Gait and balance problems are the leading risk factors for falling. Other causes include balance disorders, dizziness, visual impairment, and muscle weakness. While most fractures result from falling while doing everyday activities at home, such as climbing stairs and working in the kitchen, about 25% of falls result from hazards at home. These hazards can be slippery surfaces, poor lighting, and cluttered pathways, which are easy to fix but often overlooked.

There are strategies that you can use to prevent falls. The following suggestions can help you to fend off your fear of falling, and more importantly, make you more comfortable doing those things you want to do.

First, exercise can reduce your risk of falls. You can strengthen your body and improve your balance and flexibility by walking and by strength training. The Cooperative Extension Service coordinates a strength training program for mid-life and older adults. With seven program sites serving Garland County, this program has helped hundreds of residents improve their balance, flexibility, and strength. I regularly hear of how attending our classes helped participants avoid falls, recover more quickly from a fall, and avoid fractures. The program includes strength, flexibility, and balance exercises and is appropriate for both sedentary and active adults.

Second, you can prevent falls by modifying your home environment. Contact us for a fall prevention checklist to examine your entire home for hazards. For example, removing any throw rugs can reduce fall risk. In the kitchen, consider placing items most often used on lower shelves. In the bathroom, plug in a nightlight to make evening trips easier.

Finally, you can prevent falls by using your mind. This means to put on your figurative “thinking cap” and plan your next move. Basically, you can prevent a fall by watching where you are going and planning to make adjustments in advance. If a floor surface appears slippery, don’t walk over it. Wearing sturdy shoes that fit well can also help prevent falls. If you are remodeling your home, think about what your future needs might be.

Fear of falling is common among older adults, but this fear doesn’t have to limit your movement or your lifestyle. For more information on Extension fitness programs, or for a Home Fall Prevention Checklist, contact me at the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service in Garland County at 236 Woodbine in Hot Springs, call 501-623-6841, or e-mail me at Lgilmore@uaex.edu. Information is also available on the web at www.uaex.edu/garland.

Upholstery Workshop

Do you have a piece of upholstered furniture that could use a makeover? Sign up for the upholstery workshop set for November 6 & 7, and 10–12. This five-day workshop, a deal at only \$30, will teach the skills to reupholster furniture, and you’ll leave with a piece that looks good as new. Contact the Extension office for a workshop application. Registration is not complete until fee is paid, and space is limited.

4-H Information

If you’re between the ages of five and 19, you can join 4-H! We have a club for you, or you and a group of friends can organize a club of your own. For more information on the 4-H program, call the Garland County Cooperative Extension office at 623-6841 or 922-4703.

Master Gardener Information

If you have an interest in gardening of any type, or would like to learn more in the horticulture field, the monthly Master Gardener meetings are open to the public and guests are always welcome. For information call the Garland County Cooperative Extension office at 623-6841 or 922-4703.

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