

A caregiver's commitment

Easy steps for falls prevention

by Kathleen A. Cameron

When you're caring for an older adult, two of the scariest words you can hear are: "She fell." I got that call last winter, when my 84-year-old mother took a dangerous tumble. She had been hospitalized because of pneumonia and had just returned home. She was weak and unsteady on her feet, which led to a fall.

Mom is not alone. Every year, one in three older Americans fall, often with devastating consequences.

Mom's fall led to a hip fracture. For others, a fall can cause broken bones, head injuries and even death. In fact, falls are the leading cause of injuries for people 65 years and older. Even falls without

a major injury can cause an older adult to become fearful or depressed, making it difficult for them to stay active.

Now is the perfect time to help the older adults in your care reduce their risk of falling. September 23 — the first day of fall — is National Falls Prevention Awareness Day.

Here are six steps to get started



Get an eye exam

If your older loved one wears glasses, make sure they have a current prescription and get an eye exam at least yearly. Remember that bifocals and progressive lenses can be hazardous when using stairs and when going from bright sun into darkened buildings. A simple strategy for progressive lenses is to change glasses or wait until the lenses adjust. For those already struggling with low vision, consult with a low-vision specialist.



Discuss current health conditions

Is your older loved one experiencing new or different symptoms, such as pain and swelling? Are they having trouble remembering to take their medications or

experiencing side effects? Is it getting more difficult for them to do things they used to do easily?

All of these health factors could lead to a fall. Make sure they are taking advantage of all the preventive benefits now offered under Medicare, such as the Annual Wellness visit. Encourage them to speak openly with their doctor about all changes in their health.



Bust the myths about falling

Many older adults recognize that falling is a risk, but they believe it won't happen to them or they won't get hurt — even if they've already fallen in the past. The NCOA has a great resource on its website to help start that conversation with your loved one (ncoa.org/FallsMyths). If your older loved one has questions or concerns,

suggest they discuss them with their health care provider who can evaluate their risk and suggest ways to help.



Review medications

If your older loved one is having a hard time keeping track of medicine or is experiencing side effects, encourage them to talk to their doctor or pharmacist. Have medications reviewed each time they get a new prescription, as drug interactions can lead to falls.

Also, beware of non-prescription medications that contain sleep aids — including painkillers with "PM" in their names. These can lead to balance issues and dizziness. If your older loved one is having sleeping problems, encourage them to talk to their doctor or pharmacist about safer alternatives.