

SENIORS NEED TO KNOW

BY IRWIN A. HERMAN, MD

As I write this, the sun is shining brightly on this 70 degree day and early thoughts of Spring are in the air, prematurely, I'm sure.

However, as I think about Springtime, I also think about how folks are going to start getting in to more outdoor activity and becoming more active in general and that leads me to thinking about accidents, in particular, falls.

I'm going to start off with some statistics from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) that may sound hair-raising, but that never-the-less bear consideration and implementation.

- The lifetime medical cost (treatment and rehabilitation) of a non-fatal accidental fall in a male is \$150 MILLION and for a female is \$190 MILLION! The total direct medical related costs, in 2010, was estimated to be \$30 BILLION!
- The number of accidental falls in the U.S. in the general population is 43/1000, but in age 75 and over, it is 115/1000, more than 10% in that population!
- More than 30% of adults over age 65, fall each year and it is the leading cause of injury related deaths! 46 percent of these fall related deaths are due to traumatic brain injury!
- The most common injuries obviously are fractures, with hip, spine, arm and leg being the most common. The number of hip fractures alone per year exceeds 300,000, and of these, one-fifth die within the first year of injury due to medical complications of the injury!
- Another consequence of a fall, even without an injury, is it creates a psychological fear of falling again that can affect your lifestyle by inhibiting activities that are both healthful and enjoyable. This decrease in the quality of life can be as detrimental as an actual physical illness.
- And, finally, males are more likely to die as a result of a fall, but females are twice as likely to endure a fracture, more likely due to their higher incidence of osteoporosis.

When Einstein developed his theory of mass, velocity and energy ($E=MC^2$), little did he know we can use that to determine its impact on falls. It has been estimated that falling from a standing position is equivalent to the energy produced by being hit by a 3000 pound car traveling 5 miles per hour. Imagine the effect of falling while sitting on a bike; this hasn't been calculated yet to the best of my knowledge.

The point of this is how we need to be aware of certain risks, and more importantly, how we can prevent them. The CDC program on fall prevention recommends the following steps to help avoid this potentially deadly accident from occurring. Of course, for those of us who are also affected by the "klutz" factor, we need to be doubly aware and more pro-active than those other more normal people among us.

- 1) Develop an exercise program, with professional help if needed, to strengthen muscles, especially those in the legs and spine. Along with this, work on improving balance with appropriate exercises.
- 2) Be aware of medications that may cause dizziness or drowsiness that could impair balance and ability to focus. Your doctor can advise you on these medication properties.
- 3) Make sure if you wear eyeglasses that they are correct so that your vision is not impaired. If you are not aware of the surface you're on, then your risk of falling is increased.
- 4) Be certain that your indoor living area is safe and free of impediments. Use the grab bars as necessary, and if you are in a multistory home, make sure you use the handrails going both up and down. Obviously, good lighting is essential for you to see where you are going. If needed, make use of walking aids such as canes or walkers. Limit the use of throw rugs and other loose floor coverings. If you must use them, make sure they have a non-slip backing and edges that don't curl up, which might cause tripping.
- 5) Be careful of the type of recreational activities that you are engaged in, particularly those that require walking on uneven surfaces. Good grip shoes are important to use in those situations. This does not imply that you should avoid those healthful activities that you enjoy, but participate in them with care and forethought.

And, a final note that pertains to an observation that I commonly see as I'm driving or walking around our community: I think that people of our age have forgotten what we learned as a 3 year old from our parents, that is, "look both ways when crossing the street!" I see folks walking straight across the street to the mailbox or at a corner without even a glance to either side to see if there is approaching traffic. I know, in my heart of hearts that you have the impression that you are right to do so, but I hate to tell you, you could also, as it is said, be "DEAD RIGHT!" I think you should listen to what your mother taught you.

Have a safe summer and WATCH YOUR STEP!

The Older Adult Advisory Commission is responsible for advising the Department of Health and Human Services and the Board of Supervisors on the needs of Placer County's older adults. Meetings are held the 3rd Tuesday, at 1:00 PM. More information may be found online at:

<http://www.placer.ca.gov/Departments/hhs/adult/OlderAdultAdvisoryCommission.aspx>

or by calling the Public Authority at (530) 886-3680.