

ORGANIZATION NEWS

Information/Education Page

Preventing Falls Following Brain Injury

People who are older, have had a brain injury (including stroke), or have other disabilities have a significant risk for falling. This tip card will help you decide if you are at risk and provide suggestions on how to increase your safety and prevent falls.

How common is falling for the elderly and following brain injury?

Falling is a very common problem.

- One out of 3 adults age 65 and older falls each year.
- Fifty percent of the people who experience stroke are at risk for falling.
- Although there are no national statistics on the rate of falls for people who have had a traumatic brain injury, many of the symptoms associated with TBI are known causes of falls.

Am I at increased risk for falling?

If you check one or more of the following boxes, you are at increased risk to have a fall:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> fallen in past year | <input type="checkbox"/> need help getting dressed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> afraid of falling | <input type="checkbox"/> need help with bathing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> take many different medications | <input type="checkbox"/> difficulty paying attention |
| <input type="checkbox"/> dizziness | <input type="checkbox"/> do risky things |
| <input type="checkbox"/> poor balance | <input type="checkbox"/> use a wheelchair, walker, or cane |
| <input type="checkbox"/> difficulty walking | <input type="checkbox"/> feel unsteady getting out of bed or chair |
| <input type="checkbox"/> feel depressed | <input type="checkbox"/> feel unsteady sitting or standing |

What can be done about falling following brain injury?

You can reduce the risk of falling by taking 1 or more of these steps.

See your doctor:

- Your doctor can examine your vision, strength, walking, and balance and refer you for therapies that can improve your functioning.
- Let your doctor know if you are having problems with sadness, anger, and poor attention and memory.

- If possible, it is best to seek treatment from a doctor or therapist associated with a rehabilitation program who can address all aspects of recovery.
- Ask your doctor for a home safety evaluation to help determine how to make your home a safer place.
- Inform each of your doctors about all of the medications you take, including over-the-counter medications. Your doctor needs to know this so he/she does not prescribe something that will make you dizzy, drowsy, or weak, which will increase the risk of falling and possible injury.
- If you take blood thinners, a fall can be particularly dangerous because of the increased likelihood of bleeding.

Use good judgment:

- Use things as they are intended. For example, use a step stool and not a chair if you need to reach for something. Better yet, ask for help!
- Concentrate on one task at a time and be sure to walk slowly.
- Don't attempt things you know you shouldn't do.
- Follow basic safety precautions: clean up spills, remove clutter, etc.
- Over-the-counter medications, specifically cold and flu remedies, can increase dizziness and fall risk. Use them only after consulting with your doctor!
- Consider getting a Medic Alert System if you live alone or are alone for extended periods of time.

Use assistive devices:

- Wear your prescription glasses, if you have them.
- Be sure to use walkers or other assistive devices if you need them.
- Use assistive devices correctly. For example, lock the wheelchair before standing or transferring. Don't try to go down stairs with a walker.

- Use reachers, transfer devices, and bath aids as instructed by your therapist. If you have never talked with a therapist about these devices, ask your doctor for a referral.

Make your home safer:

- Proper lighting is important. If it is dark, turn on a light. Don't try to find what you need, such as your robe or the way to the bathroom, in the dark.
- Remove throw rugs, extension cords, furniture, or other obstacles that may make you trip from hallways and other much-used pathways.
- Be aware of surface changes, such as going from the carpet to a hardwood floor or tile, or from pavement to grass, and try to avoid them if possible.
- Use slip-resistant strips on bathroom and kitchen floors or slippery hardwood floors.
- Be aware that having a pet such as a dog or cat under foot increases the likelihood of falling.

Where can I find additional information?

If you would like more information on the references we used for this tip card, please go to the ACRM BI-ISIG website (<http://www.acrm.org/brain-injury>) or view the supplemental online-only material at <http://www.archives-pmr.org/>.

We also recommend the following websites:

American Physical Therapy Association (www.apta.org). When you get to the home page, click on the section for

“Practice and Patient Care,” and under the options for this section, you will find some more good advice on fall prevention.

Brain injury support groups are another source of information and help. Your local chapter of the Brain Injury Association of America (www.biausa.org) might help you find such a group.

Disclaimer

This information is not meant to replace the advice from a medical professional. You should consult your health care provider regarding specific medical concerns or treatment.

Authorship

This Tip Card was prepared by the American Congress of Rehabilitation Brain Injury Interdisciplinary Special Interest Group; Taskforce on Long-Term Issues. This Information/Education Page may be reproduced for noncommercial use for health care professionals to share with patients and their caregivers. Any other reproduction is subject to approval by the Publisher.

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