

The Impact of Falls in the Podiatric Medical Practice

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Introduction:

As our population continues to age and live longer lives, falls become a more common problem with serious complications resulting. Falls can lead to permanent changes in an individual's lifestyle resulting in an inability to function independently and, in turn, further decline in overall health. Many podiatric practices care for the geriatric population and should be aware of the problem and how to care for these patients. Falls can occur in non-geriatric patients as well. Falls present a major public health problem in our country. What is the role of the podiatrist in the recognition, prevention and treatment of falls? Additional articles pertaining to falls will be available on the **ComfortFit** website: comfortfitlabs.com.

Definition:

By definition a fall is described as an event which results in a person coming to rest inadvertently on the ground or floor or other lower level.

Facts Regarding Falls:

The World Health Organization (WHO) in an update from August of 2017 presented the following key facts about falls.¹

- Falls are the second leading cause of accidental injury resulting in death worldwide.
- An estimated 646,000 deaths occur as a result of falls worldwide. Over 80% occur in low and middle income countries.
- The greatest number of fatal falls occur in adults over the age of 65.
- Each year 37.3 million falls are severe enough to require medical care.
- Fall prevention should emphasize education, training, safe environments, fall-related research and the establishment of effective policies to decrease fall risk.

Information from the CDC in February of 2017 relates the seriousness and costs associated with falls.²

- One out of five falls causes a serious injury such as broken bones or head injury.
- Each year 2.8 million older people are treated in emergency departments for fall-related injuries.
- Over 800,000 patients a year are hospitalized because of a fall injury, most commonly head injury or hip fracture.

- Each year at least 300,000 older persons are hospitalized for hip fractures.
- More than 95% of hip fractures are caused by falling: usually sideways.
- Falls are the most common cause of traumatic brain injury (TBI).
- Direct medical costs for injuries related to falls are 31 billion dollars annually; hospital costs account for 2/3 of the total.

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Risk Factors of Falls:

Anyone who falls is at risk to be injured. Age, gender and individual health issues are factors that can affect the types and severity of the injury sustained. More than

one out of four older people fall each year but less than half of them tell their doctor². Sustaining one fall doubles the chance of another fall. An individual who has fallen becomes afraid of falling again and typically reduces his/her daily activities. A reduction in activity causes further weakness and increases the chance of falling. Most falls are caused by a combination of risk factors. The more risk factors are present the greater chance of falling.

Age:

Age is a significant risk factor for falls. Older people have the highest risk of death or serious injury from falls. The risk continues to increase with advancing age. Physical, sensory and cognitive changes associated with aging as well as physical environments that are not adapted for the aging population add risk.

Children are also at a high risk for falls. Falls in childhood are related to developmental stages, curiosity, increasing independence and inadequate adult supervision.

Gender:

Males and females are both at risk for falls. Worldwide, males sustain higher death rates while females suffer more non-fatal falls¹. Older women and younger children are especially prone to falls and increased severity of injury¹.

Other Risk Factors:

- Other risk factors for falls include the following.
- Occupations at elevated heights or other hazardous working conditions
 - Alcohol or substance abuse
 - Socioeconomic factors such as poverty, crowded living conditions, single parenthood
 - Underlying medical conditions such as neurologic, cardiac or other disability

Continued on page 152

ComfortFit (continued)

- Medication side effects
- Physical inactivity and loss of balance
- Poor mobility, cognition and vision
- Unsafe physical environments

Prevention:

It is important that you discuss these points regarding fall prevention with your patients. You, as a podiatrist, are an important element in helping your patients to prevent falls. The effective prevention of falls includes the following components to identify and modify the risk of falls.

- Staying physically active keeps the muscles strong and keeps joints, tendons and ligaments flexible. Strength, balance and gait training with a physical therapist are recommended particularly if you have had a fall or have risk factors. Participating in Tai Chi-type exercise

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may also be a great option.

- Hearing and vision should be tested. These senses are important components of balance. Contact lenses/glasses and hearing aids should always be worn.

- It is important to get a good night's sleep. When you are sleepy there is an increased chance of falling.

- When you stand up from sitting or lying down proceed slowly. If you get up too quickly you can cause your blood pressure to drop and cause you to feel unsteady.

- Limit the amount of alcohol you drink. Even small amounts of alcohol can affect balance and reflexes. The rate of hip fracture increases with alcohol use in older adults.³

- Eat a healthy diet, being sure to get enough calcium and vitamin D. Maintenance of a healthy weight is also important. Those that

are underweight are at risk for bone loss and fracture.

- Quit smoking as it is a factor in poor bone health and healing.

- Be aware of the side effects of medicines you take and discuss them with your doctor. It is important to tell your doctor if a medication makes you dizzy or sleepy. Medications may need to be modified.

- Screen your living environment for fall risks. This may include throw rugs, uneven steps, clutter and poor lighting. Install railings, grab bars, elevated toilets, etc., to improve the safety of the home environment.

- Use appropriate prescribed assistive devices to address physical and sensory impairments and improve gait stability. A physical therapist or occupational therapist can help. Hip protectors may also be used. The ComfortFit Stabilizer Brace can be an appropriate option to increase lower extremity stability and decrease fall risk.

- Be careful when ambulating on uneven terrain, wet or icy surfaces.

- Wear appropriate shoes with non-skid soles that properly fit and support your feet. Never walk in your stocking feet or barefooted.

- Always report a fall to your doctor even if you are not hurt as this may alert them to a new problem.

For more information on Comfort Fit's Stabilizer Brace, visit www.comfortfitlabs.com.

Bibliography/References:

¹ WHO/Falls, Fact Sheet, updated August 2017: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets>

² CDC, Important Facts About Falls, February 10, 2017: <http://www.cdc.gov/>

³ NIA, Prevent Falls and Fractures, March 15, 2017: <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/prevent-falls-and-fractures>

⁴ MedlinePlus, Falls, <https://medlineplus.gov/falls.html>

⁵ Medline Plus, Risk Assessments Can Help Prevent Falls, https://medlineplus.gov/news/fullstory_168785.html

⁶ NIA at NIA, Go4Life, Everyday Fitness Ideas, www.nia.nih.gov/Go4life