

# Elderly Falls: A Deadly and Escalating Epidemic



**An Escalating Health Crisis.** Over the past twenty years, fall deaths among older Americans have increased at an alarming rate – a reality that has caused enormous human suffering in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 30 million elderly Americans fall every year – a figure representing roughly one-quarter of all seniors. About 1 out of every 5 falls results in a serious injury such as hip fracture. In fact, falls are directly attributable to about 300,000 hip fractures every year. All told, accidental falls among the elderly result in 2.8 million emergency room visits, 800,000 hospitalizations, and over 27,000 deaths annually.<sup>1</sup>

**Unfortunately, This Problem is Only Expected to Worsen.** As America's population grows older, fall injuries and deaths are likely to increase. Based on a study from the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, during a 16 year period, fall deaths among the elderly increased dramatically, from about 8,613 in 2000 to over 25,000 in 2016 (see graph).<sup>2</sup> If these trends are left unchecked, the CDC estimates falls will result in the deaths of 7 seniors every hour by 2030.

**An Escalating Financial Burden.** The cost burden for this epidemic is immense – and growing. Based on recent estimates, medical expenditures associated to both fatal and nonfatal falls equated to roughly \$50 billion in 2015 alone. The CDC maintains that fall injuries are “among the 20 most expensive medical conditions” and generate average hospital costs of more than \$30,000 per admission. As previously noted, the vast majority of hip fractures among older Americans are a direct result of falls, involving a lifetime cost of about \$81,300 per patient. The majority of these costs, roughly \$30 billion, are borne by the Medicare program and American taxpayers.

**A Promising, Cost-Effective Solution.** In addressing this epidemic, the U.S. healthcare system has an invaluable tool at its disposal: physical therapy. According to the National Institute on Aging, patient-specific exercise regimens, utilized in combination with regular physical activity, are evidence-based solutions that can significantly reduce the likelihood of an accidental fall.<sup>3</sup>

Physical therapy prescribed treatments such as strengthening exercises, canaliculi repositioning, and balance training enable patients to remain steady and maintain their independence. Physical therapists are also trained to conduct patient home assessments which evaluate a patient's living space and identify potential fall hazards. In fact, a recent study showed that older citizens who underwent an exercise intervention from a trained healthcare professional lowered their risk of a fall by 31%.<sup>4</sup>

**Cuts Threaten Access.** Unfortunately, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services' recently-finalized Physician Fee Schedule rule for 2020 threatens patient access to fall prevention physical therapy services. The rule will impose a deep 8 percent payment cut to physical therapy services in 2021. This drastic, arbitrary reimbursement cut comes after a series of previous cuts to physical therapy in 2011 and 2013. Additionally, services provided by physical therapist assistants will be hit with a 15 percent Medicare cut in 2022 – a reality that will compound the reimbursement reductions scheduled for 2021.

**As America continues to face a myriad of daunting health challenges,** including the growing number of elderly fall-related injuries, slashing Medicare payments for physical therapy services is counterproductive and short-sighted.

## CMS must take steps to preserve access to physical therapy services for American seniors.

<sup>1</sup> Keep on Your Feet-Preventing Older Adult Falls. (2019, September 23). Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/features/older-adult-falls/index.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Table 1: Figure 1: Hartholt, K. A., Lee, R., & Burns, E. (2019, June 4). Mortality From Falls Among US Adults Aged 75 Years or Older, 2000-2016. Retrieved from <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/2735063>.

<sup>3</sup> Falls Prevention Facts. (2018, June 4). Retrieved from <https://www.ncoa.org/news/resources-for-reporters/get-the-facts/falls-prevention-facts/>.

<sup>4</sup> Sherrington C, Fairhall FJ, Wallbank GK, et al. Exercise for preventing falls in older people living in the community [published online January 31, 2019]. *Cochrane Database Syst Rev*.

