

Elderly Falls: A Deadly and Escalating Epidemic



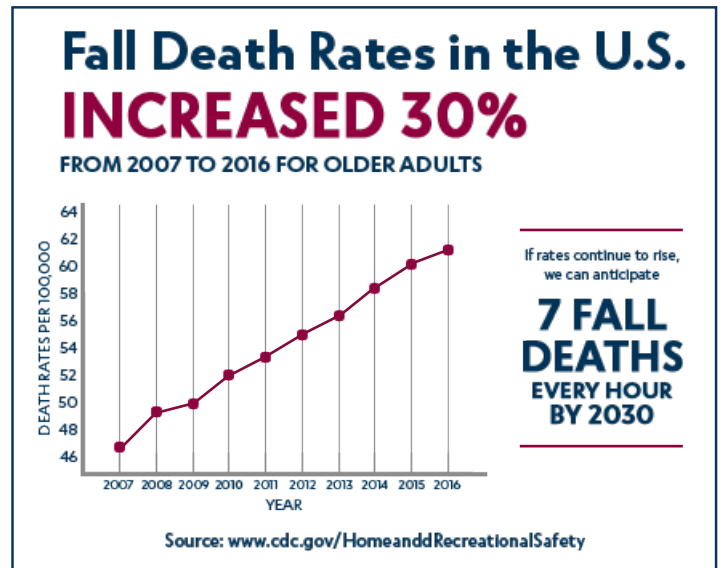
An Escalating Health Crisis. Over the past twenty years, fall deaths among older Americans have increased at an alarming rate – a reality that has caused enormous human suffering in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 30 million elderly Americans fall 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.¹

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 2016.² If these trends are left unchecked, the CDC estimates falls will result in the deaths of 7 seniors every hour by 2030. Moreover, with more seniors isolated at home amid the COVID-19 pandemic, experts believe the elderly falls epidemic will continue to escalate in gravity and scale.³

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 medial 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.⁴

Physical therapy prescribed treatments such as strengthening exercises, canlith 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%.⁵



As the COVID-19 pandemic forces more seniors to remain isolated at home, elderly Americans are at greater risk of fall-related injury. Recognizing these challenges, protecting access to physical therapy is more important now than ever before.

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

² 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>.

³ De La Cámara, M., Jiménez-Fuente, A., & Pardos, A. (2020, December). Falls in OLDER adults: The new pandemic in the post Covid-19 era? Retrieved February 05, 2021, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7527304/#:~:text=For%20this%20reason%2C%20we%20hypothesize,and%20disabilities%20among%20this%20population>

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

⁵ 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.