

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 – causing enormous human suffering in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 36 million elderly Americans fall every year – a figure representing roughly one-quarter of all seniors. Every second, another adult over the age of 65 will suffer a fall in the United States, with about 20% of falls resulting in a serious injury such as hip fracture. All told, accidental falls among the elderly result in 3 million emergency room visits, 800,000 hospitalizations¹, and over 32,000 deaths annually.

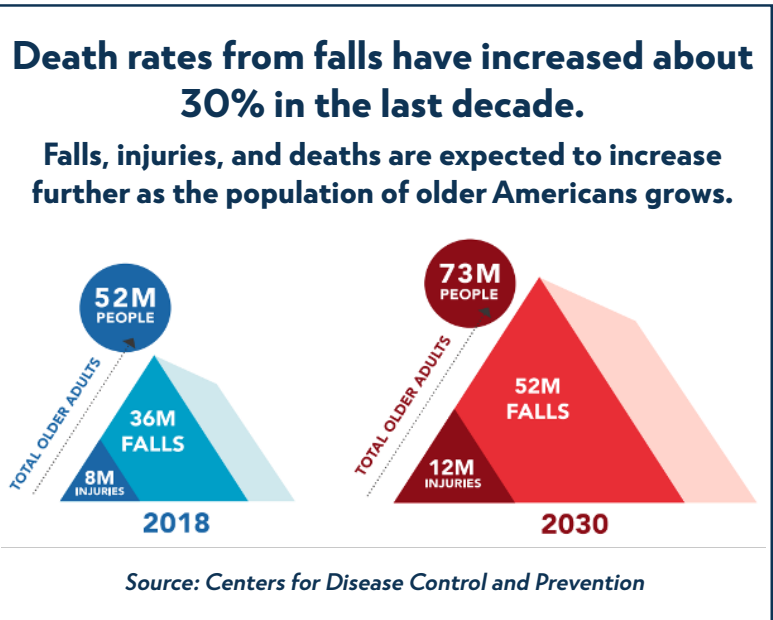
Unfortunately, This Problem is Only Expected to Worsen. As America’s population grows older, fall injuries and deaths are likely to increase. If these trends are left unchecked, the CDC estimates falls will result in the deaths of 7 seniors every hour by 2030. Moreover, with more seniors isolated at home amid the COVID-19 pandemic, experts believe the elderly falls epidemic will continue to escalate in gravity and scale.² Since March 2020, over one-third of older Americans reported being less active, one-fourth experienced declines in physical conditioning, and one-fifth said their mobility deteriorated, all of which may increase the risk of falling.³

An Escalating Financial Burden. Based on recent estimates, medical expenditures associated with both fatal and nonfatal falls equated roughly \$50 billion in 2015 alone. The CDC maintains that fall injuries are “among the 20 most expensive medical conditions,” totaling roughly \$30 billion annually. The majority of these costs are borne by the Medicare program and American taxpayers. As America’s senior population grows, the cost of falls is expected to grow. By 2030, the cost of treating falls is projected to increase to over \$101 billion, according to the National Council on Aging (NCOA).⁴

A Promising, Cost-Effective Solution. Physical therapy is an invaluable tool in addressing this epidemic. 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.⁵

Physical therapy prescribed treatments such as strengthening exercises, canalth 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

With the number of seniors set to surge, and many older Americans experiencing declines in mobility and physical conditioning during the COVID-19 pandemic, adults over age 65 are at greater risk of fall-related injury. Recognizing these challenges, protecting access to physical therapy is more important now than ever before.



¹ Facts About Falls. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/falls/facts.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 Hoffman G, Singer D, Solway E, Kirsh M, Kullgren J, Malani P. Physical Functioning and Falls During the COVID-19 Pandemic. University of Michigan National Poll on Healthy Aging. August 2021. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7302/1703>.

⁴ Get the Facts on Falls Prevention. Retrieved from <https://www.ncoa.org/article/get-the-facts-on-falls-prevention>.

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.