



## PREVENTING FALLS IN SENIORS

More than one-third of Canada's elderly population (ages 65 and older) fall each year. It's estimated that 50 percent of those who fall will suffer moderate to severe injuries such as sprains, hip fractures, or head traumas that permanently reduce their mobility and independence. Direct health care costs relating to falls among seniors in Canada are estimated at \$1 billion every year. This accounts for 84 percent of injury-related admissions to hospitals, 40 percent of all admissions to nursing homes, and a 10 percent increase in home-care services.



### How Can Physiotherapy Help?

More than 90 percent of incidents that result in injuries are predictable and preventable. Studies show that modifying the home and reducing hazards in the community can reduce the risk of falls by half. Impaired vision or mental functioning along with medications are other risk factors. A physiotherapist can help evaluate the home environment to identify objects that thought-out furniture arrangement can also help prevent unnecessary accidents.

Many seniors imprison themselves in their homes from a fear of falling. By doing this, they lose the physical benefits of normal activities and may compromise balance and muscle strength, putting themselves at even greater risk of falling even at home.

The risk of falling in older adults can be reduced dramatically when specific exercises, activities and interventions are prescribed by a physiotherapist. A targeted physiotherapy treatment program can help maintain or regain strength, flexibility and endurance in a way that still feels safe and secure.

For example, a physiotherapist will assess a senior's physical status and provide appropriate recommendations or treatment. As part of the assessment the physiotherapist will review medical history and determine the senior's general physical condition, as well as conduct a series of tests specifically designed to measure strength, flexibility, balance and gait (the way each person walks). After determining the primary limitation, a program of exercises and activities will be prescribed that focus on that area but with an overall goal of improving physical function and mobility.

If required, a physiotherapist may also use modalities to increase range of motion and musculoskeletal flexibility. These may include electrical stimulation, massage, hydrotherapy, heat, cold and ultrasound. In the event that poor balance is caused by damage to the inner ear, and there are additional symptoms such as vertigo, dizziness, or nausea, a physiotherapist may also prescribe a vestibular rehabilitation program that will correct the inner ear response to changes in position.

### **Tips For Reducing The Risk Of Falling:**

- Plant both feet securely on the ground before getting out of the car;
- Wear a good pair of lace-up walking shoes that will support your feet and provide necessary cushioning for your joints; this will make walking safer and more comfortable. Avoid high heels, slippers, and open-toed sandals, which can cause you to trip;
- Use aids for walking, balancing, hearing and seeing – view them as sources of strength to help you do things, not signs of weakness;
- In winter, before taking the garbage out to the sidewalk, sprinkle kitty litter, an abrasive cleaner or salt and sand to the curb. It might also help to sprinkle some on the ground before getting out of the car;
- Make sure the tips on canes and crutches are large and spiked for icy conditions;
- Sit rather than stand while dressing;

## More Tips For Reducing The Risk Of Falling:

- Before you get up out of a chair or up from bed, wait 10 seconds before rising to your feet to prevent dizziness;
- Install handrails and grab-bars in the bathrooms and stairways;
- Make sure stairways are well lit. Install a night light at the top of the stairs;
- Concentrate on what you're doing while you're doing it, and move at a speed that feels comfortable;
- Immediately wipe up any spills, especially on ceramic floors;
- Keep a flashlight near the bed in case the power goes out;
- Avoid taking unnecessary risks like standing on furniture. Instead, use a sturdy stepladder, or better yet, ask for help;
- Put everyday items on the bottom shelf;
- Avoid hyper extending the neck. Extending the neck backwards can cut off circulation to the brain, causing a black-out or even stroke. When visiting the hairdresser, ask for an extra towel roll for the back of your neck;
- Manage medications properly and avoid consuming alcohol when taking medications;
- Be mindful around pets. Feet can get caught in leashes, dogs can knock you down or you can trip over the sleeping or wandering pet;
- Slow down. Be conscious of risky situations and hazardous areas;
- Remove reading glasses when walking;
- Try to be physically active every day to improve posture, muscle strength and balance. Enroll in Tai Chi or an exercise program to improve flexibility;
- Don't leave clutter on the stairs that can cause a fall;
- Always keep one hand free when carrying things up and down the stairs so that you can hold on to the handrail; and
- Have your vision and hearing checked regularly.

## **Talk To A Physiotherapist**

Physiotherapists are university educated healthcare professionals who help people of all ages and lifestyles gain and maintain their desired level of active living and physical functioning. With their applied knowledge and understanding of the human body in action, physiotherapists are able to help you to increase mobility, relieve pain, build strength and improve balance and cardiovascular function. Physiotherapists not only treat injuries, they also teach you how to prevent the onset of pain or injury that can limit your activity.

## **How Do I Find A Physiotherapist?**

Finding a physiotherapist may vary from province to province. Here are some suggestions:

- Check the yellow pages of your local telephone book for listings of physiotherapists and physiotherapy clinics. You can make an appointment with a physiotherapist directly anywhere in Canada;
- Ask for a recommendation from your family doctor. While a direct referral is not necessary, your physician may be able to suggest a physiotherapist for your particular concern. Further, while many physiotherapy services are covered by provincial health care plans, Workers' Compensation plans and private insurance, some insurance companies require a doctor's referral for reimbursement;
- Visit the web site of the Canadian Physiotherapy Association at [www.physiotherapy.ca](http://www.physiotherapy.ca) to access our "Find A Physiotherapist" directory and to find out more information about physiotherapy. The CPA web site can also link you to resources for finding physiotherapists through provincial association branches and regulatory colleges.

**[www.physiotherapy.ca](http://www.physiotherapy.ca)**