

Falls Prevention & Balance Disorder



Falls can diminish your ability to lead an active and independent life. About one third of people over the age of 65 and almost half of people over the age of 80 will fall at least once this year. There usually are several reasons for a fall. Physical therapists can help you reduce your risk of falling by:

- Assessing your risk of falling
- Helping you make your home as safe as possible
- Educating you about the medical risk factors linked to falls
- Designing individualized exercises and balance training

The reasons for falls are complex and include:

- Leg muscle weakness
- Difficulty with balance or walking
- Vision problems (cataracts, macular degeneration,

- wearing bifocals)
- Medical conditions that limit your ability to get around, such as Parkinson disease, stroke, or diabetes
 - Conditions that cause confusion, such as dementia and Alzheimer disease
 - Depression
 - Taking more than 4 medications at the same time or psychoactive medications (such as sedatives or antidepressants)
 - Using a cane or other walking device
 - Home hazards (throw rugs, pets underfoot)
 - Low blood pressure

The more risk factors you have, the greater your risk. The factors associated with the greatest fall risk are:

- A history of previous falls
- Balance problems
- Leg muscle weakness
- Vision problems
- Taking more than 4 medications or psychoactive medications
- Difficulty with walking

How Can a Physical Therapist Help?

If you are worried about falling or if you recently had a fall, your physical therapist can conduct a brief check ("screening") of your fall risk. If the screening shows that you are at risk, the therapist will perform a thorough evaluation, including:

- A review of your medical history
- A review of your medications
- Blood pressure measurements while you change

positions (from sitting to standing)

- Feet and footwear assessment
- Assessment of any nervous system disorders, such as stroke or Parkinson disease
- Measure your leg strength, using simple tests such as timing how long it takes you to rise from a chair
- Determine how quickly and steadily you walk
- Assess your balance—for instance, by having you stand on one leg or rise from a chair and walk

Use special tests to measure your balance

Based on the evaluation results, your physical therapist will design an exercise and training program to improve your balance and strength. A recent systematic review of many published studies found that exercise-based programs in the home or in group settings are effective in preventing falls. These programs are especially effective when balance exercises are performed in a standing position without using much arm support.

Balance Training

Balance training has been shown to be an important and effective part of falls prevention. Your physical therapist will design exercises that challenge your ability to keep your balance, including such exercises as single-leg standing.

Strength Training

Strengthening exercises are a key element of fall prevention when they are done in conjunction with

balance training. Your physical therapist will design strengthening exercises that focus on your leg and the muscles used in maintaining posture.

Education

Your physical therapist will take the time to explain to you how to best manage your own risks for falling. Your therapist also may talk to you about the best activities for you to do to maintain your quality of life.

Fear Management

It will be important for you to talk with your physical therapist about any fear of falling that you have. Your therapist will work with you to determine whether there are activities you should avoid. Your therapist also will work with you to determine whether your fear may be unfounded and whether there are activities that you should be doing to keep strong and help your balance.