

Help prevent TBIs on Giving Tuesday

*By Ellen Waldman
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In this column, I'm going to tie together two seemingly unrelated topics: traumatic brain injuries (TBIs) and "Giving Tuesday." Hopefully, you'll see that there actually is a relevant connection.

At the Oregon Geriatric Society conference I attended, one session was called "TBI in an Older Adult Population: Mechanism, Outcomes, and Prevention." The presenter was from the Portland Clinic and an expert on this subject. As defined by the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), a TBI is a disruption to the normal function of the brain, caused by a bump, blow or jolt to the head, or penetrating head injury. Surely something we all want to avoid.

The main point of this presentation was that older adults experience a TBI differently than younger people and need different medical management. This might be a good rule of thumb for most if not all medical conditions, but she didn't say that. The most common cause of this injury is falling, more frequently seen in women and in nursing facilities. The second most common cause is a motor vehicle accident. In 2013, those 75 and older sustained the highest number of TBIs.

There are multiple reasons for these falls.

Here is the list of the medical factors which contribute to the falls: mild cognitive impairment and dementia; other medical conditions such as hypertension, irregular heart rhythms and diabetes; disorders of balance or weakness; impaired vision; Vitamin B12 and Vitamin D deficiencies; and taking multiple medications, with some meds having a particularly negative impact. If you can recognize yourself on this list, you'll want to take particular note.

Older adults experience higher morbidity and mortality from TBIs as well as slower recovery periods. The outcomes of this injury are an increased risk for depression, anxiety and PTSD. A question commonly asked is if a TBI increases the risk for dementia. The results of the studies are mixed, but some studies do suggest an increased likelihood of this occurring. The studies do show an increased risk for Parkinson's disease as well.

The best recourse was, you guessed it, prevention. You've heard this before hundreds of times, but falling is a game changer. It's more than just broken bones to be concerned about; it's also TBIs. Many of the risk factors noted above require medical interventions. There are also fall hazards within your living environment, over which you have more control. That leads us to consider how you might also help others remain safer at home. And that finally leads right to Giving Tuesday.

For those who may not be aware of this new holiday designation, it falls on the Tuesday after Thanksgiving. It's the day when we are encouraged to be generous in ways that express our wish to help others. There is even a Giving Tuesday website (givingtuesday.org) for more information. I would like to add another suggestion.

In the Rogue Valley community, we have many worthy nonprofit organizations which do wonderful work all year long. Please consider supporting one or more of them this year. For those of you who might choose one that links to this topic of preventing falls and the injuries that can result, let me direct you to one of our local non-profits, Rebuilding Together Rogue Valley (<http://rbtrv.org>). (Disclosure: I have been a board volunteer with his organization for some years). You may know them by their former name, Age-Friendly Innovators. They are still working diligently at keeping people safer from falling in their homes by assessing risks and then installing the needed supports at no cost. Especially for lower income older adults, this is literally a lifesaver.

A new way to access giving this year is through Mighty Cause (mightycause.com). I love that name, and it makes it simple to find a worthy organization to support. Here is the link to the page for RBTRV (mightycause.com/story/Rbtrvgrandmasporch). From there, you can choose to sponsor grab bars, for instance, or make another donation. What matters most is that you connect with a cause close to your heart. But if you or someone you know has ever fallen or sustained a TBI, you'll understand why simple home modifications are so important. Next week, on Tuesday, Dec. 3, find an organizations you wish to help, and make your support count.