

Free fall risk assessment can reduce risk of life-altering accidents

By Ellen Waldman

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I tell my clients and their families that I have only one rule: “Stay off the floor.” We all chuckle, but realize this is a serious topic. A fall is often the one factor that can change a person’s life from then on. Many times if a person falls once, they will fall again. One in three older adults over 65 falls annually.

In the past couple of months, three of my clients have fallen. Sue lived in an assisted living community with her husband when she fell in the middle of the night. She ended up with a broken arm, which made it very hard to use her walker. She was not a good candidate for surgery, and has not really fully recovered from this ordeal. Gerald, who lives alone, fell and incurred a seriously broken leg, requiring surgery followed by round-the-clock care providers. Peggy lived in a retirement community, but tripped over “nothing,” went down in a “face plant” and ended up with several bumps and bruises, although nothing was broken.

Are these people unusual? Not according to the data, which show how frequently people fall due to two factors: themselves and their environment. The fall fatality rate among Oregon seniors was 70.1 percent greater than the national average from 2000-2005 (Injury Prevention and Epidemiology Program, State Public Health Division, DHS).

Wouldn’t it be great if falls could be prevented in the first place? Maybe it’s possible now with the use of a fall-risk assessment tool. I spoke to Sharon Johnson of Age-Friendly Innovators, who has developed this important tool.

Question: What is the purpose of the Fall Risk Assessment?

Answer: Falls are a leading cause of hip fractures, head injuries and even death. In Oregon, falls are the 10th leading cause of death in older adults. Falls are game-changers. As aging adults, we cannot easily prevent chronic diseases like arthritis and osteoporosis, but we can avert falls. Many times they can be prevented by simple changes throughout the home. The fall risk assessment process helps the older adult and their family members identify in-home risks and remedy them.

Q: How did it get developed?

A: Sharon and Howard Johnson, Certified Aging in Place Specialists (CAPS) through the National Home Builders Association (NAHB), launched a nonprofit organization, Age Friendly Innovators, Inc. (AFI), in 2014. Early on, AFI looked at national and local fall risks and fall/fracture data. They researched dozens of fall risk assessment resources, consolidated the best approaches and developed an assessment tool they are testing under a grant from the Chaney Family Foundation. To date, they have found that small, easy-to-make changes can dramatically improve in-home safety.

Q: What happens during and after the assessment?

A: Sharon and Howard as a team spend 60-90 minutes with an older adult in their home asking structured questions, making observations based on fall risk data, and measuring widths of doors and

heights of counters, toilets and steps. They provide immediate feedback and, within 2-3 days, send a written summary of findings and recommendations. They do a follow-up email or telephone call at two weeks and then six to eight weeks later, and remain available to assure people and have any continuing questions answered.

Q: How can people have their own fall risk assessed?

A: Until the end of 2015, Sharon and Howard will come into a home on request, without any cost to the resident, and assess the fall risk of the person living there. They use the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) fall profiling criteria in combination with a review of in-home hazards. They will make immediate and longer term recommendations, along with the associated costs, and provide specific information and ideas tailored to that situation. Simply contact Sharon Johnson online at agefriendlyinnovators.org or call 541-261-2037. An assessment visit will be scheduled at your convenience, and results provided in writing within days of the assessment.

If you knew that you could prevent falls by making simple changes like securing throw rugs, appropriately placing grab bars in bathrooms, and assuring there are no trip-hazard extension cords, would you do this? The fall risk assessment process helps identify these and other in-home risks and instructs you on how to remedy them. This might make all the difference between you and a “trip to the floor.”