

Seniors: Learn to protect yourself from a fall

Doug Hartman, Co-chair, Step Smart Collier 6:02 p.m. EDT September 17, 2016



Falls are the leading cause of injury and death for seniors. Have you or a loved one fallen this year? Do you know anyone else who has fallen — a relative, a neighbor or a friend?

Every 15 seconds, an older adult is seen in an emergency room for a fall-related injury. Falls can result in hip fractures, broken bones and head injuries. Nearly 1 in 3 older Americans fall every year and 20 percent of them are hospitalized. Eleven percent never return home again. Fifty percent of those hospitalized pass away within one year. It is serious public issue

More discouraging is the fact that the average death rate of seniors who have fallen in Collier County is 55 percent higher than that of the state of Florida. But we only have 8 percent more seniors. Clearly, we — as a community — have a problem.

The good news is falls are not a natural part of aging and many falls can be prevented. That's where Step Smart Collier, an all-volunteer partnership of concerned citizens, businesses and nonprofit organizations, found its mission. Working with some of the major institutions in the county, we are committed to a program of public education and action to bring this epidemic under control

Falls can happen anywhere and will continue to occur as long as we humans are active and walk upright. Paradoxically, the majority occur in our homes, the place we know the best and are most comfortable. Risks of falls generally arise from three sources: our external physical environment, our own loss of balance and core strength through reduced activity levels and, finally, mismanagement of our drug regime.

As noted, 60 percent of falls occur in the home, so this is where Step Smart Collier partnership has placed its initial focus. We have developed a detailed check sheet for senior residents and care givers to go through each room of their homes to check for potential hazards. These check sheets are distributed at all our presentations, where we also have exhibits of the latest home safety technologies. This exhibit includes a home construction expert who can answer questions on their installation and use.

On the drug management side, we have a professional and licensed pharmacist present at our large-room presentations who can review individual's lists of drugs (including all prescription and nonprescription drugs, and herbal supplements) for possible interactions.

On the balance and strength side, we have several stations that conduct free balance testing with results on computer printouts and we demonstrate exercise regimes designed to enhance senior's balance and strength.

Additionally, we have representatives from Collier County Emergency Services and public safety to answer questions in their fields.

The highlight of the sessions is a presentation with questions and answers on the specific "Smart Steps" you can take in each of these areas to reduce the risks of falling.

Prior experience in other states with this comprehensive approach to fall prevention has produced reduction of as much as 30 percent, saving several million dollars in medical costs and numerous lives.

September is National Fall Prevention Awareness Month. Step Smart Collier is joining with the Naples Daily News to host a fall prevention and safety program on Thursday, Sept. 22 (the first day of fall), from 1 to 3 p.m. at the Naples Daily News offices, 1100 Immokalee Road in Naples. It is free and open to the public. We encourage all interested parties to attend.

Step Smart Collier is committed to providing quality speaking programs and safety exhibits to businesses, professional organizations, senior centers, senior housing and retirement communities. Programs are available for large or small groups. If you are interested, please contact Doug Hartman, county Co-chair, at 239-331-8662 or see our website at www.stepsmartcollier.org.

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