

The Doctor Writes

Archive Two

Falling: Part 1

I see plenty of chronic conditions. Problems that are related to genetics or overuse. Things like arthritis, carpal tunnel syndrome, rotator cuff tears. These are disorders you just might get no matter what you do to prevent them. I see plenty of skinny people with worn out knees. I see lots of carpal tunnel in people who don't spend a minute of their time on a computer. I have bunches of patients with rotator cuff tears who have never sustained an injury.

But here's something you can prevent. Falling. Maybe a third to a half of the disorders I see are related to some kind of fall. Kids fall and break their arms. Teens participating in sports sustain injuries to their ligaments and cartilages in falls. The elderly fall and break their hips.

We can do very little to change the course of disease processes related to our genetics but we can do a lot to prevent falling. The American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons has even recognized that falling is a problem. That would seem obvious but only recently has there been a lot of attention directed toward the prevention of falls. So, let's do it. Let's take a step toward the prevention of some of the most devastating injuries that can happen to you.

First of all, watch where you're going. Now, this may seem obvious too, but I can tell you that most people aren't doing it. We're running around looking every way but down. We're slipping on grapes in the grocery store and breaking our tailbones. We're missing the last step on our stairwell and breaking our hips. We're catching our shoe on an uneven sidewalk and breaking our wrists when we fall. These patients are bummed out because falling is preventable ninety seven percent of the time. I made that ninety seven part up but I think I'm close. If they had just looked where they were going they wouldn't be sitting in my office. They wouldn't be missing time off from work or the last half of football season.

WATCH WHERE YOU'RE GOING. After "DO NOT DO SQUATS" make it your second mantra. And guess what? If you fall and don't break your leg, you're going to have to do a squat in order to pick yourself up from the ground! It's a two-fer.

As we get older, it's even more important to watch our step. Our vision is deteriorating. Our neurons may be less sensitive to the body's position in space. We're weaker and less able to compensate in the case of a fall.



Wear good shoes. No slippers. Why do you think they're called slippers? Get rid of little throw rugs and make sure the edges of large rugs are secured down to the floor with that sticky stuff available in any hardware store. Use night lights liberally. Despite the fact that I can walk the path from my bathroom to the bed with my eyes closed, I stub my pinky toe on the edge of my bed at least once a year!

If it's an option, move downstairs or get a one story home. Analyze your house or apartment for booby traps. You think you are familiar with your place but trust me, as you get older you may start forgetting. I can't tell you how many broken hips occur in familiar surroundings. People trip over their own coffee tables. "Hey where did that come from?"

Watch out for pets. They're wonderful but don't let them get used to being underfoot. It may seem benign and cute when they're hanging around your feet but these little pests can be lethal. I have an adorable black cat who loves to rub around my legs. She follows me wherever I go, including up and down stairs. At some point she took to napping on the stairs. She's so cute. One night I came down and stepped on her. Of course as my foot sensed a fur ball instead of a plank I lunged forward in an attempt to keep from squishing her and nearly fell down the stairs. I decided right then and there to teach her a lesson which would keep her from hanging around the stairs. You'll have to figure that one out because this article isn't about pet discipline. I've had at least thirty nine patients who have broken bones after tripping over their pets.



Please don't get the idea that I have something against pets. Why would I? They're precious and they help keep me in business. But walking dogs can be dangerous. They see birds or other dogs and they take off, frequently taking their owners with them. Torn wrist ligaments and any manner of broken bones are not uncommon. Now I'm not saying to leave the dog at home or not to have one at all, no, nothing like that. I'm saying train that dog to behave. And I mean it. It's ridiculous to have a pet that crosses in front of you at will or yanks your arm off at the slightest provocation. In my opinion, dog walking accidents are 100% preventable. Please make them go away.

It's probably not necessary for me to remind you that falls can cause devastating injuries in the elderly. Hip fractures, wrist fractures, you name it. A broken bone can be the difference between independent living and a trip to the nursing home. Really. Think about it. If your arm is broken you may not be able to cook for yourself. You can't bathe. If you're using crutches or a walker you may not be able to dress yourself. Let's get to work on prevention.



Besides changing shoes, taping rugs and training pets, there's more we can do for ourselves. Try improving your balance. Here is a simple, cheap exercise you can do. Start with a single leg stand. Just stand on one leg. Go ahead. Try it. Stand next to a kitchen counter or something you can put your hand on when you wobble. Start with your left leg. Raise your right foot off the ground and hold it there for thirty seconds. You may have to raise your arms to help you balance. Your ankle might wiggle and you may feel very unstable. Don't worry, you'll get better at this. If you don't, you're going to fall.

If thirty seconds is too hard, try ten. Then do the other leg. Maybe try it three times a day. Once you get good at thirty seconds then go up by ten seconds. "Getting good" means being able to hold one foot off the ground for thirty seconds, arms at your side without having to grab on to anything. Set a goal of one minute on each leg, two times a day.

Now you're ready for advanced single leg standing. Try it with your eyes closed! You'll probably have to start all over; ten seconds, standing by a counter top, etc. Eventually you'll get really good at it but don't be surprised if it takes six months.

In six months you may be ready for the super advanced program. Go to a toy store and get a beach ball or some kind of a soft bouncy ball. Find a place in your house where you can bounce it off a wall without breaking something. Now, stand on one of your legs, bounce the ball off the wall and catch it. You'll have to start all over again at ten seconds. It's not easy. And if you don't break your hip doing this... you're on your way to perfect balance. Picture yourself playing pro football, juking your way down the field, knocking 290 pound defensive lineman down with your left arm while you are leaning at a forty-five degree angle, balanced on one foot and holding the football tight against your chest with your right arm. Trust me, you are on your way to better balance and doing something to prevent bad injuries.

There's more to falling than this. That's why I made it "Falling: Part 1."