

Fall Prevention: An Important Aspect in the Overall Plan of Care of Individuals with Developmental Disabilities (DD)

Each year, millions of Americans will be treated in the emergency room because of a fall, many of which occur in the home. As the age expectancy continues to rise, including for those with developmental disabilities, so does the likelihood of falling.

Degenerative arthritis, obesity, diabetes, heart disease, vision/hearing loss, muscle weakness, and decreased sensitivity in the feet are a few examples of impairments that affect one's ability to stay upright. These age-related diagnoses, coupled with life-long neurological, functional and/or cognitive disabilities, may increase the risk of falling for people with DD years before the general population. The good news is that falls can be prevented by following a few simple precautions.

- **Remove Obstacles in the Home.** Keep floors and stairs free of clutter. Tape down cords and wires. Remove throw rugs.
- **Wear Proper Footwear.** Wear supportive, properly fitting, comfortable shoes with a wide rubber sole that are easy to take on and off. Avoid wearing socks or stockings without shoes in the home.
- **Proper Lighting.** Maintain adequate lighting throughout the house, including stairways and walkways. A well-lit pathway to the bathroom should be kept at all times, including access to a light at bedside.
- **Review Medications.** Consult a physician to understand possible side effects of prescriptions or over-the-counter medications. Some medicines may cause drowsiness or light headedness, which can affect balance and lead to falls.
- **Stay Active.** Chances of falling can be reduced by improving strength, balance, endurance and flexibility. This can be done by incorporating simple activities in one's everyday life. For instance, participating in chores around the house such as doing laundry, dusting, and vacuuming, are easy and functional methods of conditioning. Take stairs whenever possible and daily walks outdoors are other examples. Fitness trackers and smart phone apps can be good motivators, especially when used with a friend.
- **Vision.** Schedule regular eye exams.
- **Adaptive Equipment.** Add grab bars inside and outside the shower, and adjacent to the toilet. Install railings on both sides of stairs. Use a bedside commode or urinal at night if needed to minimize the risk of falling when first awakening. Consult a physical therapist or medical equipment provider to ensure that assistive devices such as walkers, canes and wheelchairs are in good operating order.
- **Medical Appointments.** Schedule regular check-ups with your physician. Discuss the need to see a physical therapist or dietician.
- **Stairs.** Close supervision may be required on unfamiliar stairs and uneven pathways.

Encouraging individuals with developmental disabilities to be pro-active participants in their overall health can provide many benefits. Improved cardiovascular function, maintaining weight within normal limits, and adequate muscle tone, all contribute to the betterment of one's endurance and balance, in addition to producing a positive "feel good" attitude of oneself. Preventing falls for people with DD may depend upon a concerted effort among multiple health care providers and caregivers, yet it is certainly an attainable and crucial goal. For as we welcome an aging population of developmentally disabled adults, fall prevention will undoubtedly play a greater role in their overall plan of care, in order to function as safely and independently as possible at home and in the community.