

HEALTH & WELL-BEING

Kate Kennally, a physical therapist at Rehabilitation Hospital of the Cape and Islands in Sandwich, monitors a patient as he walks. She and her colleagues would prefer to prevent falls than to treat the damage a fall can cause. Falls increase dramatically as we age, and Kate talks to the author about the many contributing factors of falls and what you can do to avoid them.



PAUL BLACKMORE/CAPE COD TIMES

A BALANCED VIEW OF FALLING

Why it happens; how to prevent it

About the author

Barbara Ravage moved to Cape Cod from her native New York City in 2000, after the youngest of her children went off to college. She considers heavy doses of ocean air and Cape light the best cure for empty nest syndrome. A graduate of Barnard College, she is the author of nine books, including a biography of Rachel Carson for middle-school students and "Burn Unit: Saving Lives After the Flames," which explores the history and science of burn treatment. She balances her writing life with yoga, karate, and pottery. After years of making do with two summer weeks on the Cape, her favorite part about living here is that she's already home.

BY BARBARA RAVAGE

Did you know that nearly 1 in 3 people living independently over the age of 65 fall each year, and that over age 80, the incidence is 1 in 2? That 1 in 10 falls results in hip fracture, head injury, or other serious injuries? Those are the facts, according to fall prevention experts at the Rehabilitation Hospital of the Cape and Islands (RHCI).

"Fall risk increases exponentially with age," says Kate Kennally, DPT, a physical therapist at RHCI's inpatient location in Sandwich. She

adds that winter is high season for fall-related injuries.

Beyond slipping on snow and ice, a lot of environmental, physical, and health-related factors increase the risk of falling. "It's rarely a single thing," Kate says. "More often, it's a combination of factors." Among those:

- **Vision problems**, including depth perception and delayed visual reflexes, may make it difficult to see thresholds and stairs, and to respond quickly enough to obstacles in your path.
- **Side effects of medication**, especially for people who take mul-

tiple medications, may interact to cause dizziness and weakness. That's a particular liability if different doctors prescribe medications, a compelling reason to tell all your health care providers about all medicines you take, whether by prescription or not.

- **Inner ear problems** may also cause dizziness. Some types of hearing loss and ear infections may affect the vestibular system, which governs the sense of balance.

- **Inactivity** may lead to muscle weakness and imbalance. That can

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be a problem in any season, but Kate observes that people tend to stay indoors more in winter. "If you've not been moving around, taking walks or doing other regular exercise, you may be out of condition and not even realize it."

- **A decreased range of motion in the ankles** may interfere with the ability to keep your balance. "If you stand on one foot, you'll notice a lot of ankle movement as you try to keep your balance," says Kate. Arthritis, pain of any kind, and lack of use can negatively affect ankle range of motion. Moreover, Kate says, as we age we "tend to lose the ability to flex the feet with toes pointed upward. That can affect walking, going up and down stairs, getting up from a chair."

- **Neuropathy**, or nerve damage, especially in the feet, affects people with diabetes and other conditions that are more common as we age. "Neuropathy interferes with sensation and perception of pain," Kate explains.

"A person might not know what he's stepping on or be aware of an uneven surface."

- **Environmental factors**, ranging from slippery surfaces indoors and out, wide thresholds, older wooden floors and stairs that may be uneven, scatter rugs, electric cords, clutter, and poor lighting, can lead to a mishap.

- **Bowel and bladder urgency**, Kate explains, has many hazards. "Especially at night, if you get up quickly to rush to the bathroom, your blood pressure drops and you might faint. If there's not enough light, you might trip on something, but if you turn on a bright light, it can be equally hard to see. You may not be fully awake and alert to your surroundings."

- **Inappropriate footwear** can also cause problems. Kate stresses that shoes should fit properly, and provide support and traction. She recommends against high heels, open-backed shoes and slippers, and stocking-feet indoors.

- **Excessive alcohol** impairs balance, judgment, and strength. It may increase fatigue and cause or worsen the side effects of medication.

- People with **certain health con-**

ditions have additional risk factors for falling. For example, both stroke and diabetes may cause "foot drop," which interferes with walking.

Hip fractures are the most common and most debilitating injuries from falls. Fractures of the spine, pelvis, leg, arm, and hand are high on the list. What begins as a reflexive outstretched hand often ends with a broken hand, wrist, or arm.

Even a minor bump on the head can lead to a potentially serious traumatic brain injury. Medical attention should be sought for anyone who loses consciousness after falling, has a severe headache, or experiences nausea, dizziness, or fatigue. People taking blood-thinners should seek medical attention without delay whether they experience those symptoms or not.

Although Kate and her RHCI colleagues work with patients injured by falling, they far prefer to prevent falls than treat the aftermath. The first preventive measure Kate recommends is an annual checkup with a primary care physician. Women especially should discuss having a bone scan to detect and, if necessary, treat osteoporosis. Both vision and hearing should

be screened, and a specialist consulted if problems are found. Blood pressure should be measured, and treated if it is either too high or too low. A thorough review of all medications can uncover risky side effects and interactions. And if you are experiencing problems with balance, coordination, or weakness, ask the doctor about a referral to outpatient physical or occupational therapy.

According to RHCI, its Falls Prevention Program "is designed to reduce the risk of falls for individuals with balance, weakness, and gait deficits due to the aging process or medical conditions. Based on the results of a physical therapy evaluation, the patient will be placed on a therapy program. Components of the program may include endurance and strength training, gait training, balance training and safety education. Referrals to the program may be made by primary care physician, specialty physicians or home care agency."

Whether in a special program or not, it's vital to maintain — or regain

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And Off Cape

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Falling

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— physical fitness, with particular emphasis on strength and flexibility. Kate singles out tai chi as especially beneficial, a recommendation backed up by clinical studies. “Tai chi works specifically on slow movement that can improve the muscular strength required in core stability. It involves holding patterns, and moving slowly in and out of your base of support, which helps with balance.”

Kate comes from a family of health-care providers — her mother is a nurse, her sister is an occupational therapist. “I wanted to do something in health care that directly helps people,” she says. She holds bachelors and masters degrees in physical therapy from American International College in Springfield, after completing a five-and-a-half-year program in 2002. In 2008, she got her doctorate from Simmons. “My husband, Michael, is also a physical therapist, and he went through all this with me.”

Now 30 years old and the mother of 9-month-old Caroline, Kate hails from

Littleton, Mass. She and Michael have lived on the Cape for four years. “Before that, we worked as traveling PTs in several different parts of the country. That’s how we ended up on the Cape. We had just gotten married and wanted to settle down, but we didn’t know where, so we took temporary assignments in Brewster. We liked it so much that we stayed.”

Kate loves the small-town atmosphere. “There’s a really nice community here and you get to know people pretty well.” An outdoor enthusiast, she appreciates the natural beauty and the opportunities for sailing, kayaking, and riding the rail trail. She and Michael escape to New Hampshire for mountain biking and snowshoeing.

One of her favorite things about Cape Cod is the people. “It’s a really interesting and dynamic group of people. Doing physical therapy, I get to talk with my patients a lot. So many interesting people gravitate to this area. Especially with the older population that tends to retire here, there’s a wide variety of different backgrounds and people who have been experts in their fields all across the world. Many people come from somewhere else, and there’s always an interesting story that goes with that.”

Quickhits

WebLinks

Home Safety Checklist and Fact Sheet about Fall Risk and Prevention from the RHCI Web site:

www.rhci.org/outpatient-care/adult-care/falls/

Information about traumatic brain injury due to falling, including signs and symptoms, from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

www.cdc.gov/BrainInjuryInSeniors

Kate’s tips for avoiding falls

- Keep driveways and walkways clear of snow and ice; have a plan in place for clearing and sanding these areas if you can’t do it yourself.
- Keep areas around your home well lit at night; carry a small flashlight in your pocket or purse when you are away from home.

- Install and use railings on stairs.
- Choose footwear with good traction and secure fit.
- Keep a small bag or container of salt or cat litter inside your car (not in the trunk) to sprinkle on slippery spots around where you park.
- If you find yourself in a slippery spot, widen your base of support with your feet evenly spaced; hold your hands out or up to improve stability; walk slowly.
- At the supermarket, park near the grocery cart return. “People may think it’s best to park near the store entrance, but if you park near the return area, you can hold onto the cart as you go in, do your shopping, go back to car, unload, and then the cart return slot is right there.”
- If, despite all precautions, you do fall, try to slow your descent. “If possible, lean against a wall so you can slide down rather than pitching forward or backward, and hitting the floor hard.”

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