

HELPFUL HINTS FOR SENIORS

By Bill Hull, Haskell Senior Living Solutions

As Easy as Falling....

I slipped a little in the bathtub the other day. It wasn't anything major and it wasn't the first time. It did make me remember the first time and the broken resolutions which I had promised myself afterward. As they say, the first time scared me "spitless." I had just finished scrubbing the tub and it was way too slick. In an instant, I was grabbing for anything I could and wound up with soap in my eyes, a twisted ankle, and a fistful of shower curtain. O well, I needed a new one anyway! I wore a grimace for a few days each time I shifted my weight in a certain way; but there was nothing seriously wrong. I quickly forgot the fear that had instantly surged through my being along with the pain that had surged through my foot as I had flapped and fluttered and failed to maintain my balance. It was the same fear I had about a year ago when I came racing a little too quickly from my bedroom. Within a split second, I ended up in a heap at the bottom of my stairs. Once again, I wasn't really hurt, but it really shook me up: "My kids are all gone," I remember thinking, "I really am totally alone here. What would I do if I needed help?" It was one of those uncomfortable moments that break through the routine upon occasion and force us to face reality: My nest is empty. My life has changed, and I am facing a new kind of vulnerability. Up until that moment I had never thought twice about the slightest possibility of finding myself inside my own house, injured and alone. Then came that first slip in the tub. That was more serious, and I had vowed to do something about it: I would be more careful, I would find a non-slip tub mat and maybe put up some of those grab bars. Most important, I would stop scrubbing the tub to a sheen that would make a downhill skier drool. I don't think I intentionally neglected my promises. It's not like I said to myself "Hey, you!.... Sally! What's the matter with you? You getting soft? You getting weak? You turning chicken? Buck up, Bubba, you're too young to worry about things like this." No, I didn't think that way, (not consciously) of course not. But the other day when I slipped again, I realized that, for one reason or another, I had certainly ignored my own warnings.

Maybe I was too afraid of the truth to think about it long enough to do something wise. Maybe sometimes fear keeps us from being proactive in ways that could reduce the fear. It's interesting that according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one of the key factors that lead to an increased risk of falling is actually the fear of falling. Turns out the fear of falling is a double whammy increasing my chances to actually fall, and immobilizing my resolve to take steps to be more safe.

We hear about it all the time: The statistics are truly startling: More than one third of adults 65 and older fall each year. Nearly two million people over age 65 will be treated in the emergency room after a fall this year, and a half million will need to be hospitalized. This brings the cost of falling among seniors to well over 19 billion a year! It is the leading cause of injury deaths and the most common cause of nonfatal injuries. Most fractures among older adults are caused by falls, and 90% of all hip fractures are caused by falls. 30% of people who fall suffer serious injury. People who are 75 and older who fall are five times more likely to need long-term care for a year or longer. And about one in five hip fracture patients will die within a year of their injury.

Compared to these sobering statistics it seems almost ridiculously obvious that every living soul, regardless of our age (or gender) would do the simple things required to lower our risks. According to The National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, the following will definitely reduce your risk of having a fall:

1. Begin a regular exercise program

Exercise is one of the most important ways to reduce your chances of falling. It improves balance and coordination. Lack of exercise leads to weakness. Exercise like Yoga and Tai Chi (we offer both at Arbor Ridge) are the most helpful in fall prevention.

2. Make your home safer

More than half of all falls happen at home. To make your living space safer you can remove things you can trip over such as papers, books, clothes, and shoes from stair cases and where you walk.. Remove small throw rugs or use double sided tape to keep the rugs from slipping. Keep items you use frequently low enough to reach so that you don't have to use a step stool or ladder. Put up the grab bars in the bathroom near the toilet and in the tub. Use non-slip mats. Improve the lighting in and around your home. Make sure there are handrails on all the staircases. (of course you can always seek a solution like Arbor Ridge where the focus is one-floor living. Do away with the stairs altogether! and the icy driveway!)

3. Dress for safety

Wear shoes that give good support and have thin non-slip soles. Think about what you wear and avoid the bulky or flowing clothing that can trip you if you are in a crowded place.

4. Review your medicines with your doctor.

This includes the over-the-counter cold remedies and vitamins you are taking. As you get older the way some medicines work in your body can change. Some combinations can make you drowsy, light-headed or dizzy.

5. Have your vision checked

If your vision is limited by glaucoma, cataracts or just the wrong pair of eye glasses you will increase your chances to fall.

Of course if you are like me, you might allow your fear to make you forget the whole thing until a slippery reminder comes along: a tub that is too slick, a walk that is too icy. I have to laugh at someone I know who is always telling me , “ I do not intend to fall.” Does anyone? Eleanor Roosevelt once said. “You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing which you think you cannot do.” In this case, I must do the thing I can easily do. Hoo-Rah! Tomorrow I shop for a grab bar and a non-slip mat. How about you?