



Local Health Commentary

A VIEW FROM THE VILLAGES HEALTH

Thanksgiving and Christmas are typically the most heavily traveled holidays, with road trippers and air passengers heading to family gatherings. And while the excitement often borders on chaos, older adults may also be grappling with fear — particularly the fear of falling.

Falls are the leading cause of fatal and non-fatal injuries among seniors, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

A 2021 study showed 30 to 50% of older adults living independently feared falling, regardless of their history. Aging bones, muscle loss, slower reaction times and hosts of other factors and physiological changes can make falls more devastating as we age. Prescription medications can also contribute to falls. Around 2 million Americans take anticoagulants, which thin the blood and can make minor cuts and scrapes more serious. Aside from injuries, falls present other pain points, including loss of independence and financial burdens related to surgery, hospitalization and medical care.

CONDITIONS THAT MAKE YOU MORE LIKELY TO FALL

Research has identified many conditions that contribute to falling. These are called risk factors. Many risk factors can be changed or modified to help prevent falls.

They include:

- » Lower body weakness
- » Vitamin D deficiency (that is, not enough vitamin D in your body)
- » Difficulties with walking and balance
- » Use of medicines, such as tranquilizers, sedatives, or antidepressants. Even some over-the-counter medicines can affect balance and how steady you are on your feet.
- » Vision problems
- » Foot pain or poor footwear
- » Home hazards or dangers, such as broken or uneven steps and throw rugs or clutter that can be tripped over

— Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

A Balanced Approach

The Villages Health brings more than 1,600 health and wellness classes to the community through the Learning Center. Matter of Balance is an eight week program with accompanying exercise groups, open to anyone interested in evidence-based exercises targeted at improving strength, flexibility and balance. We offer fall risk assessment screenings and other educational tools to empower individuals to stay active and healthy. Better balance begins with education.

Health exams are imperative to protecting against falls. Small changes in vision or hearing can affect the way you react to stimuli around you, alter your depth perception and put you in danger of trips

and falls. Have your doctor review your medications for potential interactions. Discuss common side effects, such as dizziness or lightheadedness, drowsiness, and impaired alertness or judgment.



Kelly-Ann Buckley

At home, you can avoid accidents by clutter proofing walking areas, replacing flip flops with secure footwear, removing throw rugs that can bunch or slide, installing handrails and grab bars in bathrooms, and using adequate lighting throughout

living areas. When you begin to look around and assess your home, fall proofing becomes a no-brainer. It may take some forethought and planning to navigate safely when traveling or visiting others, however.

Stepping Out Safely

For trips by plane, request a wheelchair to make the journey through airports less taxing, and there's no shame in using walkers and canes if they help. Focus on minimizing fatigue and weakness. Most importantly, wear shoes that support good balance, provide traction and fit your feet properly. Prior to visiting friends and family, communicate your needs to

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your hosts. Ask that pets are placed in other rooms until you're seated and ready for greetings. When you take a proactive approach to potential challenges, you find solutions and gain peace of mind. Although fear of falling can

make a person vigilant, it can also be problematic. Don't let it spoil your social outings or deter you from trying new things. Research shows that fear of falling can lead to isolation, decreased self-esteem, and poor quality of life. It's no surprise then that most falls happen at home. At The Villages Health, we reinforce the importance of regular exercise, activity, and maintaining strength and flexibility to help reduce the risk of falls.

To learn more about better balance, register for our free "Fall Prevention" class.

Kelly-Ann Buckley is a population health educator for The Villages Health.

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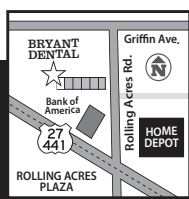


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