



Florida Second in Nation for Number of Seniors Hurt in Falls

406,000 Seniors Fell in Three-month Period

Florida ranks second in the nation behind California in the number of seniors injured in falls, according to a federal report issued Thursday on a problem that claims lives and devastates individual lifestyles.

An estimated 406,000 Florida seniors — more than one in eight — fell during a three-month period in 2006, and more than 140,000 were injured enough to be sidelined for at least a day, the federal [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) reported. Nationwide, more than 5.8 million fell and 1.8 million were injured.

The CDC urged more efforts to prevent falls, which kill about 16,000 seniors and hospitalize 1.8 million each year at a cost of \$19 billion. Broken bones, especially hips, can lead to long hospital stays and death.

"A fall can destroy someone's life, right out of the blue," said David Schwartz, president of the ElderCare Cos., a Hallandale firm that specializes in fall-prevention programs.

The CDC report said: "Even when the injuries are minor, they can seriously affect older adults' quality of life by inducing a fear of falling, which can lead to self-imposed activity restrictions, social isolation and depression."

Falls are most common among those older than 80, affecting one in five, and among women. The CDC figures were based on a survey of almost 93,000 seniors who were called at home as part of a national health assessment in 2006.

Many falls can be prevented, health experts said, and it's no mystery how to do so: Strengthen muscles with exercise, make sure medicines don't make seniors woozy, maximize vision, remove barriers from the home and keep in daily touch with a buddy who can call for help if needed.

Florida has tried to combat the problem for years, with limited success.

County offices of the Area Agency on Aging regularly run fall-prevention programs that attempt to teach seniors how to protect themselves. The Department of Elder Affairs also sponsors local programs, a spokesman said.

Often the biggest hurdle is getting seniors to confront the problem and take the first step, said Paula Smith, vice president of ElderCare.

"Most older people are in denial over falls. They are afraid to tell their children or their doctors or their building managers they have fallen, for fear their children will not let them live alone any more," Smith said.

"When we have workshops, we tell them it's not a natural part of aging to fall, that you can do something about it," Smith said. "You can see them sitting up taller when they hear that."

The state hired ElderCare to try an experimental fall-prevention program among 6,000 elderly Medicaid recipients in Broward and Miami-Dade counties in 2003. Legislators cut the funding before the three-year effort was finished, state officials said.

By Bob LaMendola
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