

Worried about family or friends falling? New guideline identifies those most at risk

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A new guideline developed by the American Academy of Neurology finds certain neurology patients are at a high risk of accidental falls and should be regularly screened to help prevent the high number of fall-related injuries and deaths in the United States each year. The guideline is published in the February 5, 2008, issue of *Neurology*, the medical journal of the American Academy of Neurology.

“There is a lack of awareness among doctors and patients in recognizing and preventing falls, which can lead to hip fractures, head injury, hospitalization and in some cases death,” said lead guideline author David J. Thurman, MD, MPH, with the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, a division of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, GA, and member of the American Academy of Neurology.

Each year, unintentional falls in the United States account for more than 16,000 deaths and 1.8 million emergency room visits.

To develop the guideline, the authors analyzed all available scientific studies on the topic, and found people with stroke, dementia, and walking and balance disorders are at the highest risk of falling. Having fallen in the past year also strongly predicts that a person will fall again. People with Parkinson’s disease, peripheral neuropathy, weakness in the legs or feet, and substantial vision loss are also likely to fall.

“People need to know that falls are preventable and there are simple tests

to determine if you're at risk of falling," said Thurman. "Oftentimes the doctor may not ask about falls and the patient may not mention falls. But, it's important to discuss falls since some people can face serious life consequences after falling, such as disability and loss of independence, which may be averted only through fall prevention."

Thurman says identifying people at high risk of falling is a critical step in preventing future falls. "This guideline recommends doctors routinely ask patients about falls and use screening measures, such as the Get-Up-and-Go Test or Timed-Up-and-Go Test, and mobility tests, to determine if a person is likely to fall and needs prevention help, such as making their home safer or beginning a regular exercise program."

Thurman says routinely asking patients about falls will ultimately help reduce fall-related injuries and deaths and lead to better quality of life for patients at risk.

Source: American Academy of Neurology

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