

Intervention helps older adults prepare for emergencies

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According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in three adults age 65 and older falls at least once every year. These falls can result in moderate to severe injuries, such as hip fractures and head traumas, and can increase the risk of early death. Now, a University of Missouri researcher has found a way to help older adults who live independently better prepare for health emergencies.

"Older adults want to be independent and live at home rather than in nursing homes," said Lawrence Ganong, professor and co-chair of the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at MU.

"However, [older adults](#) living alone have increased risk of injury during emergencies. Adults living in rural communities are especially at risk because there are fewer healthcare professionals in these areas, less community support and slower ambulance response times."

For the study, Ganong designed vignettes, or stories, that demonstrated fictitious older adults in [emergency situations](#). Ganong had members of the older adults' support network, whether family members, neighbors or [close friends](#), discuss the hypothetical scenarios with the older adults. He found that older adults who had discussed the stories with their support members created better emergency plans than those who only received emergency planning information from members of their [support networks](#).

"Older adults don't like to be told what to do or how to do something," Ganong said. "When family members or close friends try to tell older

adults what to do when it comes to emergency planning, they tend not to listen. However, we found that when family members presented these hypothetical stories to older adults, the older adults began to think of themselves in the emergency situations and began to talk about what they would do. The stories helped older adults think about what could go wrong and, consequently, helped them plan for emergencies."

Ganong, who also is a professor in the MU Sinclair School of Nursing, has created a guide for caregivers that contains the stories and offers guidance on how to create personalized vignettes. He currently is working on a way to make the guide available to caregivers and older adults via the internet.

"Creating vignettes isn't a difficult process, and most caregivers could grasp the concept pretty quickly," Ganong said. "The key is to make sure the vignettes relate to the older adults in subtle ways. It shouldn't be obvious that the stories are based around their lives but rather lives or situations similar to theirs."

In addition to helping older adults prepare for falls or other health situations, vignettes also can be conversation starters for other difficult discussions among family members.

"These vignettes, because they are hypothetical, are designed to make discussions easier on both [family members](#) and the older adults," Ganong said. "The stories make conversations more relaxed and could possibly help ease discussions about other sensitive topics, such as wills or funeral arrangements, to ensure that everyone in the families is on the same page."

The study, which was funded by the United States Department of Agriculture, was published in the *Journal of Family Nursing*.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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