

# Falling is the leading cause of death for Florida's elderly

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When 94-year-old former President Jimmy Carter fell and broke his hip recently, he exemplified the danger that falling down represents for the elderly.

Indeed, falls are the leading cause of accidental death for Floridians age 55 and older, according to the most recent data.

Data released in 2017 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows nearly 3,000 [adults](#) over the age of 55 died from falling in Florida that year. Half of those deaths occurred in adults over the age of 85.

According to Chantal Cote, manager of rehabilitation services for inpatient rehab at Halifax Health, a majority of those deaths occur from complications following the fall and not the fall itself.

According to the International Osteoporosis Foundation, up to 20% of patients die in the first year following hip fractures, mostly due to pre-existing medical conditions. There is also a greater risk of dying for at least five years after a fall with injuries.

"If they fracture a hip, which is the most common injury, they will need hip surgery," Cote said. "They may not be able to tolerate the anesthesia. They become mobility impaired, they lose their strength quickly and they are immobile, which puts them at more risk for pneumonia."

As adults age, their [balance](#) becomes impaired for a variety of reasons. Their vision begins to worsen affecting their [depth perception](#), reaction time slows, medication side effects can make them cloudy or lightheaded. Also, their veins are thinner, making bleeding easier and bones more brittle.

"When we lose our balance, we have two strategies that help us—strength, and how quickly we react to loss of balance," Cote said. "As we age we are not able to react as quickly. They are not as strong, and they are not as able to regain their balance as a younger individual."

Other injuries elderly adults can sustain from a fall include [head injuries](#),

bleeding internally and externally, and fractures of wrists and shoulders.

"They are often on [blood thinners](#) so if they fall their vessels are typically thinner and break more easily," Cote said. "They are more likely to bleed or hemorrhage."

Holly Smith, spokeswoman for the Florida Department of Health in Volusia, said falls can impact more than just physical injury.

"Falls in the elderly can lead to the fear of falling again, a loss of independence, and difficulty completing all of the activities of daily living which can profoundly affect quality of life and lead to depression," Smith said.

Cote said falls in elderly adults occur most often in the bathroom or on the stairs.

"As they get older, they get up more frequently to use the restroom," she explained. "They need to make sure to turn on the light so they can see their surroundings."

Dr. Sonia Millian, primary care sports medicine physician at AdventHealth Palm Coast, said keeping up with exercise is an important prevention method for elderly adults.

"The important things include weight-bearing exercise, like walking," Millian said. "Then doing resistance exercise like weights, Pilates and yoga. These are low-impact activities that allow you to hold up your own body."

Doing these exercises helps build up [muscle mass](#) and allows the bones to remain strong.

"Balance training helps catch you and helps your agility," Millian said.  
"If you think about it, walking is like a one-legged balance."

Other things [elderly adults](#) can do to prevent falls are to get their eyes checked yearly, clearing paths by making sure there is no clutter on the floor, wearing proper footwear in the house such as socks and slippers with grips on the bottoms, removing throw rugs, and making sure to stay active.

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