



Occupational Therapy and Prevention of Falls

Education for older adults, families, caregivers, and health care providers

Slips, trips, and falls in and around the home

are frequently the cause of injuries to older adults, particularly fractures to hips, shoulders, ankles, wrists, and hands. In 2001, more than 1.6 million seniors were treated in emergency departments for fall-related injuries and nearly 388,000 were hospitalized (Centers for Disease Control, 2003). Falls can lead to severe injuries and even death (Murphy, 2000; Alexander, 1992). One out of three Americans over the age of 65 sustain a fall each year (Hornbrook, 1994; Hausdorff, 2001). The total cost for all fall injuries for people age 65 and older in 1994 was \$27.3 billion (Englander, 1996).

Occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants are part of the injury prevention and care team for older adults, their families, and caregivers.

Occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants provide valuable assessment, training and support to help older adults remain as independent as possible and injury-free. Safe and full participation in activities and control over one's ability to remain within the home and community are priorities of older adults. Occupational therapists are particularly skilled in assessing and managing personal and environmental risk factors in all activities for older adults. Practitioners offer a breadth of knowledge, skills, and recommendations that have long been valued by those who have recovered from injury or illness. Linking clients' goals and priorities with modifications and adaptations that support their ability to participate in meaningful activities are hallmarks of occupational therapy. Additionally, occupational therapy

practitioners play a critical role in training clients, families, and other interdisciplinary team members regarding the multiple circumstances that can affect function and create personal and environmental risk, such as falls.

Occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants work with the client and when relevant, with caregivers, to scan the home environment for hazards and assess the individual for limitations that contribute to falls. Examples of potential hazards are stairs in need of repair, lack of hand rails and grab bars, inadequate lighting, and rugs that are not affixed to floors. Individual limitations include weakness, low vision, and perceptual disorders.

Occupational therapy practitioners provide direct consultation to older adults, as well as to community centers, nursing homes, and assistive living environments. Identification of environmental factors that contribute to falls and implementation of the therapist's

recommendations to remove those elements can improve the health and safety of older adults and reduce health care costs.

Fear of falling can be both a risk factor for falls and a consequence of falling. Occupational therapy practitioners assist older adults to assess whether their fear is based on reality, whereby specific precautionary measures, environmental modifications, and adaptive equipment may be recommended. Sometimes, fear of falling may be based on lack of confidence and other psychological and social factors. In these situations, occupational therapy practitioners assist older adults to recognize and overcome their fears and problem-solve about how to keep from falling while staying active. Fear of falling can lead to self-limitation in performing activities and tasks that people need to do to remain as independent as possible. This can bring about a cycle where weakness and decreased stamina develop as individuals restrict their participation in activities, leading to further restriction of their engagement in normal daily life. The end result is increased risk for falls.

Occupational therapy practitioners assist in breaking the inactivity cycle and sedentary lifestyle that increase fall risks. Staying active and safe are goals that older adults want for themselves: occupational therapists specialize in empowering older adults to do just that.

Preventing falls and alleviating the fear of falling are cost-effective interventions that promote the safety and well-being of older adults. Many payers, including Medicare, will pay for these services as part of a covered occupational therapy benefit.

The profession of occupational therapy focuses on a person's ability to participate in desired daily life activities or "occupations." Aging can affect the ability to manage as we continue to live in familiar surroundings or transition to new ones. As people age, occupational therapy practitioners use their expertise to help them to prepare for and perform important activities and to fulfill their roles as community dwellers, family members or friends, workers, leisure devotees, or volunteers. ■

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For more information, contact the American Occupational Therapy Association, the professional society of occupational therapy, representing nearly 35,000 occupational therapists, occupational therapy assistants, and students working in practice, science, education, and research.

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Occupational Therapy: Skills for the Job of Living

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