

# HEALTHY SENIORS



## Falling Doesn't Need To Be Part of Aging Process

By Pam Snowdon

"Falling is not a normal part of aging," says Marie Welch, a consultant with the Red Deer Primary Care Network (PCN). Although one in three seniors report falling, Welch says there are many factors which influence this "complex" issue, and that often falls are preventable. "Just because you are a senior, doesn't mean you have to fall," she says. "The existing condition of your muscles, the medications you are taking, your eyesight, or other health issues may play a role in your risk for falling, as will having pets or loose rugs underfoot."

Welch is leading a program initiated by the Red Deer PCN to create awareness of the problem, and to activate programming to help seniors prevent falls.

"Although, of course, it isn't just the cost we are concerned with here, in 2008 the amount in Alberta alone for fall related costs was 96 million dollars, with that expenditure estimated to rise to 228 million dollars by the year 2021," says Welch, citing statistics compiled by the Alberta Centre for Injury Control & Research (ACICR).

Apart from the financial costs to the health care system, the price of falling may be costly in terms of hardship to the individual who experiences a fall - in more ways than one. A senior who winds up in the hospital after a serious injury may never return home, and the repercussions on their independence can't be underestimated. "Things may have to change, even if they do return home," says Welch. "Therefore, even the fear of falling is great and can have an impact."

Preventing falls in seniors is being highlighted in November. Finding Balance, an initiative of the ACICR and the Alberta Medical Association, provides information to assist seniors with their concerns regarding falls.

The initiative is built around key points such as keeping active, watching where you step, reporting dizziness to your healthcare provider, along with discussing your current medications to ensure they are not part of the problem. The organization Finding Balance provides on-line and print resources. Local Finding Balance activities have taken place in Red Deer and the surrounding areas during November, partnering with interested local organizations such as the Golden Circle Seniors Resource Centre, Nurse Next Door, Comfort Keepers, the PCN, and Alberta Health Services.

The Red Deer PCN has begun a four week fitness and awareness program called Strong and Steady, to which doctors can refer their patients for falls prevention awareness and activities.

Welch says that the seniors who participated in the program in October learned exercises for muscles strength, flexibility, balance, and steadiness. Meeting once a week, they discovered tips to integrate fitness into their daily routines, how to make their home more safe in terms of preventing fall related injuries, as well as where and how to access activities in the community. The Collicut Centre, for example, offers gentle fitness classes for seniors. The participants were also given a poster illustrating the specific exercises they learned for use at home.

"There are lots of great resources in Red Deer," says Welch. "The Golden Circle has activities for seniors, the city pools have aqua-size classes, and there is always mall walking when the weather is bad." Welch acknowledges that nervousness about others seeing us in exercise clothes or a bathing suit can be a barrier. "You know, the truth is, nobody is really looking at us, they are busy doing their own thing!" she says. There are other activities that

don't involve special outfits, as well as the option of exercising in the privacy of your own home. While some of us have a mindset that prefers to avoid exercise, many of the "boomer" generation are accustomed to exercise as part of a regular routine.

"We know you have to move it or lose it," Welch points out. "Our bodies are meant to move. But, you must persevere to see the results you're after. And you can stay active by doing things you enjoy, like gardening, or even mowing the lawn."

Seniors wanting to attend the next session of the Strong and Steady program need to be referred by their doctor, with the criteria that they are at risk for falls, have fallen in the past, or have a fear of falling. Welch says the feedback from those who attended the session to date was "really positive".

"Four weeks is not a lot of time, but we are seeing that little things make a big difference in increasing their functional mobility in their homes, and this in turn has a big impact on their feelings of independence." The website [www.findingbalancealberta.ca](http://www.findingbalancealberta.ca) provides specific information on steps for preventing falls. As well, Health Link Alberta [toll free 1-866-408-LINK (5465)], or your own health care provider can give you more information.

Welch says that because seniors living in care facilities report fall related injuries, she is

offering a home based exercise program through the PCN to interested, privately owned facilities, too. "We can teach the staff the exercise program, and they in turn can teach it to their residents. We really want to help them encourage seniors to be active."



Kathleen O'Connor, a Life Enrichment Coordinator at the Redwoods Retirement Residence in Red Deer



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