

Friday, December 14, 2007

Eliminate home hazards to keep seniors on their feet



Jennifer Bush
Register Columnist
The Orange County Register
jbush@ocregister.com

Find and repair common home hazards to prevent falls in your home before the holidays, especially if older guests plan to visit.

Poor lighting, cluttered living spaces, unstable furniture, throw rugs and slippery bathroom surfaces are just a few hazards that can send an older adult to the hospital with serious injuries.

"Falls can be devastating to seniors," said Steve Everhart, president of The Senior's Choice, a Dana Point-based membership organization for senior-care providers. Falls are the primary reason for admissions to nursing homes and are responsible for 70 percent of accidental deaths in people over 75. Twenty-five percent of seniors who suffer a hip fracture die within a year. Injuries from these falls result in \$70 billion in medical costs every year, he said.

Because of these statistics, Everhart has become a national senior advocate dedicated to keeping seniors on their feet.

"Tripping on clutter and electrical cords is a common problem," he said.

A pile of shoes by the front door, a stray newspaper or even a squeaky dog toy on the floor can be significant hazards for a senior. While younger members of the household may be used to stepping over such items, older adults can be compromised by impaired eyesight, balance disorders, cognitive impairment and muscle weakness, which increases their risk for falls.

The three areas of the home where seniors are most vulnerable are bedrooms, bathrooms and kitchens, he said. Often a fall can happen while navigating from

the bedroom to the bathroom at night. Make sure that these paths are properly lit and clear of clutter and furniture.

Slick bathroom surfaces create a significant hazard for seniors. Install nonslip mats, grab bars and a tub seat in the shower. An elevated toilet seat and a grab bar next to the commode can help seniors make an easy transfer.

Make sure stairways have sturdy handrails. Install lights or place colored tape on each step to provide a visual distinction between the steps. Paint the trim in doorways a different color than the floor.

After Everhart's mother fell over a throw rug in the kitchen and broke her leg, she told him that she had thrown out all the scatter rugs in his grandparents' home when they became older. But she didn't think that she needed to worry about such things.

"The problem is that no one likes to think of themselves as old," he said. So it's common to think of falling as "something that happens to someone else."

Find a complete home fall prevention checklist at www.theseniorschoice.com or call 800-481-2899.

Contact the writer: 714-796-5020 or jbush@ocregister.com

Play it safe

The Home Safety Council offers these additional tips:

- Check the lights over all stairways, hallways, porches and entries to ensure all bulbs are working and are bright enough to illuminate the entire area below. Stick to the maximum safe wattage, which is printed inside the fixture.
 - If tubs and showers don't already have nonstick strips or mats in them, affix them now. Install sturdy grab bars inside the bath and shower area. Place night-lights inside bathrooms and in the hallways.
 - Turn down the temperature on the hot water heater to 120 degrees F or less to prevent scalding.
 - Make guest rooms safe as well as welcoming. Place a night light inside each room and in the hallway outside it. Provide each guest with a working flashlight. If possible, place a telephone in each guest room as well.
- Check www.homesafetycouncil.org for more information.