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Older adults and the risk of falling

Recently, electrical engineers at the University of Utah have developed a network of wireless sensors that can detect if a person is falling (http://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2013-09/uou-wnd090613.php). This is considered breakthrough technology because the elderly person using this type of monitoring would not be required to wear any type of device, yet would still be linked to a service that would call for emergency help.

For those who are 65 years old or older, falls are a leading cause of injury and death. Current technology requires that a person who has fallen to push a button to summon help. However, the person must have been wearing the device with a call button when they fell. A study done in 2008 showed that 80 percent of the elderly with call buttons did not use the device at the time of a serious fall, mostly because they were not wearing the call button at the time.

While this new technology is exciting in that it can insure help for those who experience a serious fall more quickly and effectively than current devices (which are often not used properly), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reminds us that preventing falls in the first place is the most effective strategy (<http://www.cdc.gov/Features/OlderAmericans/>). As the CDC points out, helping ourselves and our loved ones to remain home independently and safely is the goal. Since falls are a leading cause of injury and often result in loss of independence for the elderly, knowing how to reduce the risk of falls is an important goal.

One in every three adults age 65 and older falls each year; of those, 2 million are treated in emergency departments as a result of a fall. The risk of falling increases with each decade of life. Long term consequences of falling can be devastating, resulting in loss of independence, and possibly a need for long term care outside the home. However, unlike other aging issues, the risk of falling need not be an inevitable part of aging, since many falls can be prevented. There are steps that you can take, or can encourage an older loved one to take to protect against falls.

The CDC recommends these prevention tips:

- **Exercise:** Failing to obtain regular exercise can weaken leg muscles, and increase the chance of falling. Exercise programs such as Tai Chi can increase strength and improve balance.
- **Medication review by a professional:** There are medications or combinations of medications that can have side effects of dizziness or drowsiness. Often side effects of a medication or interactions with other medications can be controlled or eliminated if they are recognized. A review of all medications taken, including over the counter medications by a doctor or a pharmacist can reduce the chance of falling.
- **Regular vision evaluations:** Use of prescription eyeglasses and regular (yearly) exams go a long way to preventing falls.
- **Elimination of safety hazards at home:** Removing all tripping hazards (loose area rugs, clutter, etc.) and good lighting help prevent falls at home.

The CDC has more resources on its website, including tips for home safety. Spending the time to prevent falls for yourself or loved ones will pay off in longer independence and improved health.