

## Occupational Therapy's Role with Fall Prevention

Slips, trips, and falls in and around the home are frequently the cause of injuries to older adults. In 2012, an estimated 3.2 million older adults received medical treatment for injuries related to falls, with many of these injuries resulting in decreased independence, a need for long-term-care support, and increased risk for early death. There were also 24,190 fatal falls. Falls remain the leading cause of injury and death among older adults, with a 2015 estimated total medical cost for fatal and nonfatal fall injuries of \$30.9 billion (Burns, Stevens, & Lee, 2016).

Occupational therapy practitioners possess the critical skills needed to address fall prevention with older adults. Research supports that fall causes are multi-factorial in nature, influenced by conditions within the individual, within the environment, and as a result of the interaction between the two. The most successful falls prevention initiatives are those that use a multi-faceted approach. Occupational therapy practitioners are skilled at evaluating and addressing influences from the person, their activity roles and routines, and the environment to maximize independence for older adults. Linking clients' goals and priorities with modifications and adaptations that support their ability to participate in meaningful activities are hallmarks of occupational therapy.

### The Role of Occupational Therapy

Occupational therapy practitioners work with the client and caregivers to review the home environment for hazards and evaluate the individual for limitations that contribute to falls. Recommendations often include a combination of interventions that target improving physical abilities to safely perform daily tasks, modifying the home, and changing activity patterns and behaviors. Occupational therapy services regularly include training clients, families, and interdisciplinary team members on strategies to support these fall prevention initiatives.

In addition to direct care for older adults, occupational therapy practitioners can assist in falls prevention on a larger scale through consultation to staff of community centers, nursing homes, and assisted living facilities. Identifying environmental factors that contribute to falls and implementing the occupational therapy strategies to ameliorate these elements can improve safety and reduce health care costs while enhancing the participation of older adults in those communities.

### Addressing Broader Ramifications

Fear of falling can be both a risk factor for falls and a consequence of falling. Defined as a lasting concern about falling that leads to an individual avoiding activities that he or she remains capable of doing, fear of falling often leads to curtailing activities and tasks that people need to complete in order to remain as independent as possible. As a consequence of these self-limiting behaviors, older adults experience decreased physical functioning, which then contributes to an increased



risk for falls. Occupational therapy practitioners assist older adults in recognizing and addressing fear of falling through focusing on the client's individual, specific concerns. For example, a client may avoid sleeping in bed after falling at night while attempting to walk to the bathroom. The intervention then focuses on strategies designed to reduce falls risk, such as bed mobility, nighttime bathroom needs, and safety, which enhance the client's confidence in his or her ability to go from the bed to the bathroom during the night.

Occupational therapy practitioners assist in breaking the cycle of inactivity and sedentary lifestyle that increase the risk of falling. Staying active and safe are common goals of older adults. By helping them reach these goals, occupational therapy practitioners empower older adults to maximize their ability to live life to its fullest.



### Examples of Fall Risk Factors Addressed by Occupational Therapy

- Intrinsic Factors: Lower-extremity weakness, impaired balance, cognitive impairment, urinary incontinence, sensory impairment, fear of falling, side effects of medications
- Extrinsic Factors: Throw rugs and loose carpets, lighting glare, pets, clutter, uneven sidewalks, thresholds, unstable or nonexistent handrails

### Conclusion

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 this ability, whether we continue to live in familiar surroundings or transition to new ones. As our population continues to grow older, there is an even greater need for occupational therapy practitioners to help prevent falls while facilitating older adults' ability to safely maintain their valued roles and occupations. Occupational therapy practitioners are especially qualified to perform multidimensional assessments of risk factors for falls and to implement physical, environmental, and behavioral interventions to reduce the risk of injury, improve safety, and enable older adults to maximize their function and fulfill the roles that reflect their values and identities.

### Reference

Burns, E. R., Stevens, J. A., & Lee, R. (2016). The direct costs of fatal and non-fatal falls among older adults—United States. *Journal of Safety Research*, 58, 99–103. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jsr.2016.05.001>

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Occupational therapy enables people of all ages live life to its fullest by helping them to promote health, make lifestyle or environmental changes, and prevent—or live better with—*injury, illness, or disability*. By looking at the whole picture—a client's psychological, physical, emotional, and social make-up—occupational therapy assists people to achieve their goals, function at the highest possible level, maintain or rebuild their independence, and participate in the everyday activities of life.