



Fall Incidents and Native American Elderly

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The Danger of Falls for Native Elders

Falls are a major health risk for elders. They cause physical injury, immobility, depression, social isolation, nursing home placement, and death among elders nationwide. A fall by an elder is more likely to result in a hospital stay than any other problem. Four out of five injuries taking place in the bathroom were due to falls (CDC, 2008). Death commonly follows fall related injuries because of other health complications resulting following the fall; falls account for fifty percent of deaths due to injury among elders (CDC, 2008). The risks and devastation of a fall is seriously underestimated. Typically only falls with injury requiring medical attention or health problems are reported and most falls are not witnessed. Additionally, elders may suffer added stress and/or restricted activity, socialization, and independence from a fear of falling. The fear of falling tends to occur after an elder has experienced a fall (CDC, 2008). The information on risks of falls among American Indian and Alaskan Native (AI/AN) elders comes from “Identifying Our Needs: A Survey of Elders” conducted by the National Resource Center on Native American Aging (NRCNAA) between 2008 and 2011. The surveys were collected by tribal members for over 300 American Indian tribes, Alaskan villages, and Hawaiian homesteads throughout Indian Country (NRCNAA, 2011).

Age is a risk factor for falls; the likelihood of falling begins to rise steadily after age 75. As individuals age, they are more likely to have an increased number of health concerns. With each added health problem, the risk of falling increases. Some specific health concerns of Native Americans include high blood pressure, heart disease, arthritis, obesity, and diabetes (especially those who have had leg amputations). Fall risks for any elder include things such as living alone, muscle weakness, bad eye sight, memory loss, unsafe home environment, decreased balance, and medication side effects. The most common injuries from falls are bruises, head injuries,

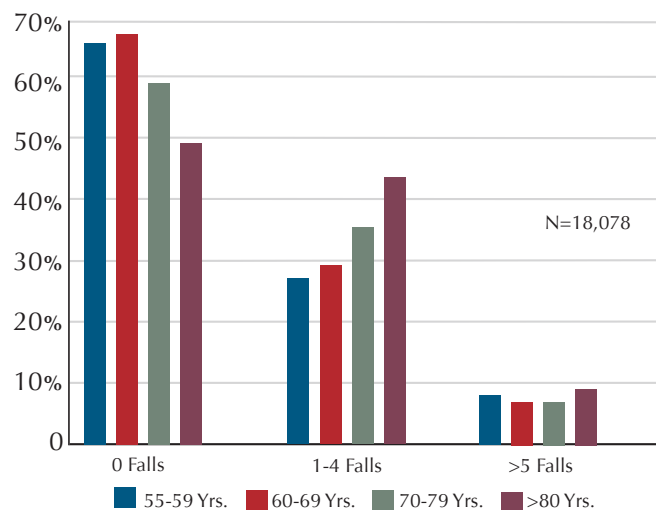
joint dislocation, muscle strains, fractured or broken bones, sprains, and death. The bones most often fractured or broken are the wrists and hips because these are the body parts that hit the ground (CDC, 2008). In the United States an average of 332,000 hip fractures occur annually; of this number 4% will die in the hospital while another 23% will die within one year of the fall (Bonder & Bello-Haas, 2009). The number is likely higher but mortality is not documented as a direct result of the fall because death usually comes weeks to months after falling. As age increases injuries become more threatening and recovery becomes less of a possibility.

Summary of Findings

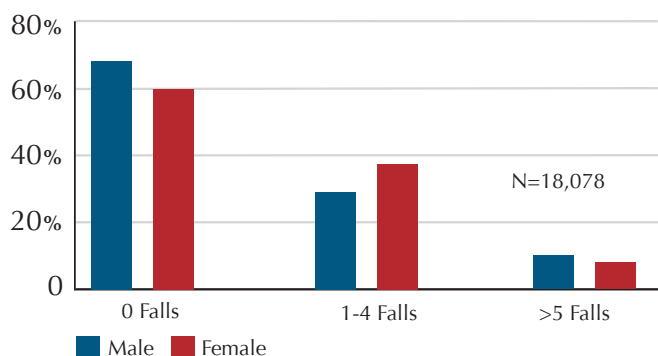
The elders from the “Identifying our Needs: A Survey of Elders” were divided into four age groups: 55-59 years, 60-69 years, 70-79 years and 80 years and over; the majority of those surveyed were in the 60-69 category. Over 18,000 elders were surveyed, where 62.5% were female and 37.5% were male.

- 40.3% of Native female elders report falling in the past year.
- 34% of male elders report falling in the past year.

Percent Falls by Age Group



Percent Falls by Gender



- Nationally, approximately 30% of elders over 65 report falling in the past year.
 - As people age they have a greater risk of falling and a greater risk the fall will result in a critical health problem (Tremblay, Jr. & Barber, 2011).

Conclusions and Implications – What Does This Mean?

Prevention and better treatment of injuries are the best way to reduce the number of falls elderly individuals have.

Risk Factors and Tips to Prevent Falls

(CDC, 2008; Tremblay, Jr. & Barber 2011)

Osteoporosis – brittle bones due to lack of calcium, Vitamin D, and physical exercise.

- Eat or drink sufficient calcium including milk, yogurt, cheese, fish, and shellfish, selected vegetables such as broccoli, soybeans, collards and turnip greens, tofu and almonds.
- Get sufficient vitamin D in order to enhance the absorption of calcium. Vitamin D is formed naturally from exposure to sunlight, but some may need a supplement.
- Regularly do weight-bearing exercises.

Lack of physical activity resulting in poor muscle tone, decreased strength, loss of bone mass.

- Get some exercise
 - Exercise can increase strength, improve balance and reduce falls.
 - A program such as tai chi or the Wise Elders Living Longer (WELL) Balanced work to decrease falls, maintain strength, balance, and stamina in elders.

Impaired vision can increase the risk of falling.

- Keep your vision sharp.
 - Poor vision can make it harder to get around safely. Have your eyes checked and wear the right glasses.

Some medications can contribute to falls.

- Be mindful of medications.
 - Some medications or combinations of medications can cause dizziness or drowsiness. This makes falls more likely.
 - Know the common side effects of all medications.
 - Talk to your physician or pharmacist about using the lowest possible dosage and reducing risk of falls due to medications. Have them do a “brown bag” review of all your medications.
 - Remove all out of date medications and those no longer used.
 - Limit intake of alcohol since it interacts with many medications.

Environmental hazards contribute to at least one third of all falls by elders such as tripping over objects, poor lighting, loose rugs, lack of grab bars, and unsteady furniture. Use a Home Safety Checklist to identify and repair fall risk areas.

- Outdoors
 - Repair cracks and sharp edges of sidewalks and driveways, install handrails, keep walks clear of ice and snow, install adequate lighting.
 - Remove high doorway thresholds and trim shrubbery along path to home.
- All Living Spaces
 - About half of all falls occur at home. A home safety check can help identify hazards like clutter, poor lighting, loose rugs, and electric cords across walk ways.
 - Clear walk around furniture and on steps.
 - Use adequate lighting and nightlights.
- Bathroom Safety
 - Add non-slip surfaces and grab bars inside and outside tub/shower.
 - Install grab bars next to toilet for added support.

If it is no longer possible for an elder to live independently or to remain with family alternative options such as assisted living and nursing homes are available, but rarely in Native communities.

More research can be done to evaluate specific age groups and their needs. As age increases more help is needed with activities of daily living and every day errands, this is natural and should not be negatively viewed. More should be done to help Natives on reservations where there are fewer options of living arrangements.

Native elders 65 years and older are at a great risk of serious health consequences as a result of falls. More education of elders and their caregivers regarding the seriousness of the falls to quality of life and life expectancy is important to improve safety. Eliminating risks, providing safety messages, offering safety education programs, and participation in exercise, balance and flexibility programs like Wise Elders Living Longer (WELL) Balanced help elders decrease their risk of falls and improve their quality of life (NRCNAA, 2011). WELL Balanced can also reduce the stress from the fear of falling. The old adage, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" holds true when it comes to elders and falls. For more information on WELL Balanced, visit www.nrcnaa.org.

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Home Safety Checklist

ALL ROOMS

- Do you use carpet with short pile (thin carpet)?
- Have you applied double-sided carpet tape to rugs that can slip?
- Is your furniture arranged so you can easily walk around it?
- Are electrical and extension cords in your walking path?
- Can you turn on lights without having to walk through dark areas?
- Do you use nightlights?
- Can you easily reach a light switch when you come into a room?
- Do you keep exits and hallways clear?
- Do you use stable chairs with armrests to help you get up?
- Do you always watch that your pets are not underfoot?

- Yes ☐ No ☐
- Yes ☐ No ☐
- Yes ☐ No ☐
- Yes ☐ No ☐
- Yes ☐ No ☐
- Yes ☐ No ☐
- Yes ☐ No ☐
- Yes ☐ No ☐
- Yes ☐ No ☐
- Yes ☐ No ☐

Tip

- Put a chair at the entrance of your home to remove or put on your shoes and boots.

STAIRS

- Are there handrails on both sides of the steps?
- Can you reach the handrails easily?
- Are the steps even?
- Do you use non-skid, rubber stair treads, or coated skid resistant surfaces on non-carpeted steps?
- Is there good lighting in the stairway?
- Do you stack objects on the stairs?

- Yes ☐ No ☐
- Yes ☐ No ☐
- Yes ☐ No ☐
- Yes ☐ No ☐
- Yes ☐ No ☐
- Yes ☐ No ☐

Tips

- To help avoid taking a misstep, you can paint wooden or concrete steps with a strip of contrasting color on the edge of each step or on the top and bottom steps.
- Don't rush going up or down stairs. Rushing is a major cause of falls.

BATHROOM

- Are there rubber bathmats or strips in bathtubs and showers?
- Do bath mats next to the tub or shower have rubberized backing or are they secured in place to keep them from slipping?
- Have you installed grab bars in the bath tub?
- Do you use raised toilet seats and/or handrails if you are unsteady?
- Do you clean up water from the floor to avoid slipping?
- Do you have a nightlight in the bathroom?

- Yes ☐ No ☐
- Yes ☐ No ☐
- Yes ☐ No ☐
- Yes ☐ No ☐
- Yes ☐ No ☐
- Yes ☐ No ☐

Tip

- Some tile and bath cleaning products increase slipperiness. Be careful when using these products.

OUTSIDE

- Do you have handrails along outdoor steps?
- Do you spread sand or salt on icy walkways?
- Do all your entrances have an outdoor light?
- Are the front steps and walkways around your house in good repair and free of clutter, snow or leaves?
- Can you reach your mailbox safely and easily?

- Yes ☐ No ☐
- Yes ☐ No ☐
- Yes ☐ No ☐
- Yes ☐ No ☐
- Yes ☐ No ☐