

## Policy Brief – Falls in Iowa

### Background of the Problem

One out of three adults age 65 and older falls each year, but less than half talk to their healthcare providers about it.

Among older adults, falls are the leading cause of injury death. They are also the most common cause of nonfatal injuries and hospital admissions for trauma.

20 to 30% of people who fall suffer moderate to severe injuries such as lacerations, hip fractures, or head traumas.

These injuries can make it hard to get around or live independently, and increase the risk of early death.



Unintentional fall-related injuries and deaths have risen 20% in the last decade in Iowa. Falls are the second leading cause of injury death, behind motor vehicle crashes. For those over the age of 65, it is the leading cause of death.

Older adults are hospitalized for fall-related injuries five times more often than they are for injuries from other causes.

In Iowa, 20% of the population is over the age of 60 and the number of older Iowans is predicted to grow rapidly. With the aging population, the rates for emergency department visits and hospitalizations due to falls most likely will increase significantly.

### What are the costs?

Among community-dwelling older adults, fall-related injury is one of the 20 most expensive medical conditions.

The total charges for fall-related hospitalizations in Iowa average \$92 million per year. This is the largest of any injury indicator and is high due to the large average number of hospitalizations.

The total charges for emergency department visits due to falls are \$35 million per year, the most costly of any other type of injury seen in an emergency department. The average charge per visit is around \$14,000.

### How does it impact someone's life?

In addition to medical costs, falls also contribute to a decreased ability to perform household tasks, a reduced quality of life, and may result in loss of independence for those over 65.

Falls are the most common cause of traumatic brain injuries (TBI).

Most fractures among older adults are caused by falls.

Many people who fall develop a fear of falling, which may cause them to limit their activities leading to reduced mobility and loss of physical fitness, which in turn increases their actual risk of falling.

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## How can older adults prevent falls?

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Older adults can remain independent and reduce their chances of falling. They can:

- Exercise regularly by focusing on increasing leg strength and improving balance.
- Review medicines with their doctor or pharmacist to identify ones that may cause side effects such as dizziness.
- Be properly evaluated and fitted for adaptive equipment, including eyeglasses, shoes or walking devices.
- Make their homes safer by reducing tripping hazards, adding grab bars in the bathroom, adding stair railings and improving lighting.



## Who is at Risk?

The chances of falling and of being seriously injured in a fall increase with age. In 2009, the rate of fall injuries for adults 85 and older was almost four times that for adults 65 to 74.

People age 75 and older who fall are four to five times more likely than those age 65 to 74 to be admitted to a long-term care facility for a year or longer.

Rates of fall-related fractures among older women are more than twice those for men.

## What can be done to reduce falls in Iowa?

Health care providers can identify a patient's risk for falls, assess the scope of risk, introduce tailored interventions and provide effective referrals through use of a screening tool.

Create programs to reduce seniors' risk of falls and provide consumer education to older adults on identifying risks for falls and risk reduction.

Encourage academic health care programs to include falls prevention education as a core subject area in professional courses of study.

Include fall risk assessment and referral for interventions across all care settings for older adults.

Promote Complete Streets initiatives that support entire roadways being designed with all users in mind - including pedestrians of all ages and abilities, bicyclists, public transportation vehicles and riders.

Pass legislation that provides a refundable income tax credit for up to 50% of costs incurred for an individual to retrofit a primary residence to accommodate aging and disability access.

Designate the first week of fall each year to be "Fall Prevention Awareness Week."

**For more information, visit**

<http://www.idph.state.ia.us/FallPrevention/>