

Information about Managing Falls

Supporting Information Leaflet (2)



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Introduction

Falls are common in people who have a neuromuscular disorder. It is important to reduce the risk of falling and this leaflet discusses the reasons why you might fall and how to help prevent falling.

Balance

There are four components to our balance and each component is important when trying to avoid trips and falls. These components are:

- **Muscle strength**
- **Balance (the balance centre is located in our ear)**
- **Vision (eyesight)**
- **Proprioceptive and sensory feedback**

Muscle Strength

Your muscle condition may cause your muscles to be weaker and this may be progressive, i.e. you are noticing that your muscle strength is changing over time. If your muscles are weak, they will tire more quickly and tired muscles do not respond well to activities needing continuous energy such as walking or standing. Sometimes people don't know when their muscles are tired before a trip or fall. They will describe their knees as suddenly 'giving way' when they are standing or walking and this may cause a fall.

The natural ageing process will also cause muscles to become weaker over time and this as well as a neuromuscular condition, can cause the muscles to be weaker than expected.

A fall can cause you to be off your feet for days, weeks or months. The longer you are off your feet, the more natural muscle wastage there will be and muscle is more difficult to re-build if you have a muscle condition.

The 'Information about Fatigue Management Supporting Information Leaflet (1)', includes useful information about how to prevent your muscles from becoming overly tired and you can discuss this in more detail at your physiotherapy appointment.

Balance

Your neuromuscular condition may affect your balance and balance problems can increase the risk of you falling. Changes in hearing do happen with age. Our ears contain the semicircular canal that constantly monitors our position and gives the brain information on whether we are standing or sitting, moving or still etc. The brain uses this information to constantly guide our muscles on the best way to support our bodies so we don't fall. If the ear is affected in any way, this can have a major effect on our balance as the brain may not receive the correct signals. Some neuromuscular conditions can affect hearing and if you have a condition where hearing loss is part of your symptoms then it is essential that you have regular hearing checks.

Vision (eyesight)

Poor or damaged eyesight can cause falls. It is a good idea to visit your optician regularly and follow their advice as vision can gradually get worse with age. Some muscle conditions are also associated with eye problems and you can discuss your particular type of muscle condition with your doctor to see if your eyesight could be affected in time. If you have glasses, make sure you wear them, particularly when in unfamiliar surroundings. Good lighting is also important, especially when walking to the toilet in the middle of the night. (Night lights are useful if you do not like using full lights).

Proprioception and sensory feedback

Proprioception is the body's ability to sense movement within our joints and gain information on our joint position. This ability allows us to know where our limbs are in space without having to look. It is important in all everyday movements but especially important where precise coordination is essential. Our nerves communicate proprioception to our brain. If you have a condition that affects the nerves in your feet and legs, then your brain will not receive the appropriate sensory signals to know where you are. For example, if you are walking over uneven ground, your muscles are not able to make refined movements quickly enough to help you keep your balance as your brain is not entirely sure where you are and how much of an adjustment is required.

Medication

In some instances, medication can affect balance. We know that medications such as allergy medicines, blood pressure tablets, diabetes medicines, sleeping tablets and muscle relaxants can cause dizziness. It is always useful to review your medication with your GP if you notice you are becoming dizzy or light-headed.

How to avoid falls

Tired muscles do not respond well to changes in speed and direction. This means you will need to be more careful when moving around both in and out of doors. This is really important in busy shopping centres when you are navigating around people or objects or walking in unfamiliar places. Sometimes, if we are in a place that we don't know, for example an airport or going to a different hospital department, we are looking at signs and directions rather than paying attention to where we are placing our feet. People are more likely to experience a fall

under these circumstances than in a more familiar environment where all of their attention is in walking or transferring from one position to another.

If you are walking with someone, it is important that you don't turn and look at them when you are walking. This puts your body in a rotated position which needs more muscle strength and this can also cause you to overbalance. Always look in the direction you are walking as you may need to use your eyesight to help you navigate over uneven surfaces.

You may want to consider using a walking aid such as a stick or crutches. Your local physiotherapist can carry out an assessment to see if a stick, crutches or zimmer frame would be useful, depending on your arm strength.

Walking aids will help your balance and give those around you a visual prompt that you need a bit more personal space. However, a walking aid is something else to carry and some people find it further disturbs their balance. You can discuss this with your physiotherapist.

Ankle Splint

If your lower leg muscles are weak, you may have a 'drop foot'. 'Drop foot' is when you cannot lift your foot and toes properly when walking, which increases your risk of falling. A drop foot may be permanent if there is tightening of the weak calf muscles, or it may just happen at the end of the day when you are tired and your muscles are not able to work as efficiently. If this is the case you may need to wear an ankle support.

It is important that you wear your ankle support especially when outside. Walking on uneven ground is more difficult as you need to adjust the height you lift your feet with every step. As you tire, you may not be able to lift your foot high enough over bumps, uneven ground, slopes and kerbs and you may fall.

Walking up and down stairs can also be more difficult if you have weak muscles and if you have a drop foot (or risk of drop foot when you are tired), then using an ankle support can be helpful in avoiding trips and falls.

Your physiotherapist and orthotist will be able to advise you on the best support or orthotic device to suit your need. As everyone's need is different these can vary from dynamic elastomeric fabric (lycra) socks to rigid ankle supports such as an ankle foot orthoses (AFO). It can take time to get used to a support or orthotic device and sometimes the physiotherapist or orthotist may try a few different approaches until you find something that works for you.

Wheelchairs

You may also want to consider having a wheelchair assessment as using a wheelchair outside can prevent falls. A wheelchair will conserve your energy while getting you to your destination more safely. You can keep a folded wheelchair in the boot of the car and use it when you are having a tired day, or you can use it more regularly for getting around the shops. Some people will get a chair for going on holiday so they can become more confident in places where they are less likely to meet someone they know.

Many people can find going into a wheelchair for the first time an emotional experience. It can be a difficult time for both them and their families. They worry about how their friends and neighbours will perceive them. Some people worry that it will make them worse or they will get lazy. Others feel that the chair will be awkward to store, it will take up too much room and will prevent them from going places.

However, these fears are generally unfounded. Once you get used to using the chair, most people say that it gives them a new lease of life. They are able to go distances they couldn't

before and they don't feel as exhausted. It is worthwhile discussing any anxieties with your physiotherapist.

Your GP or physiotherapist can refer you to WestMARC, at the Queen Elizabeth University Hospital for a wheelchair which is free of charge.

Falls

If you are at risk of falling, your physiotherapist will assess your ability to get off the floor (so long as you are not injured) and help you find the best way to get up.

It is not always possible for those around you to help you due to your muscle weakness. Sometimes people may try to pull on the arms but because the shoulders are weak, they will be unable to help you in this way and may cause you injury. After a fall, you can be a bit shaken and this also can make it difficult to get to your feet again.

Mobile phones

Always carry a mobile phone, even if you are in the house so that if you fall you can call a family member who can help you up or an ambulance if needed. It is important to bring your phone everywhere including the bathroom area which is generally a confined space. We don't always think of bringing the phone in to the bathroom with us but if you fall here, you may land in an awkward position and be unable to get back to a seated position without help.

Occupational Therapy (OT) Assessment

If you fall frequently, we may recommend an Occupational Therapy assessment. An OT assessment will highlight specific areas that may potentially be unsafe such as getting out of bed, getting on or off the toilet etc, and discuss solutions. An OT can also help you look at your home and make small changes such as identifying hazards such as rugs or worn carpets. They may

suggest you have specific equipment in your house such as a hoist or booster aid.

You can contact your local OT through your nearest Health and Social Care Department or Rehabilitation Team.

Pendent Alarm

Some people have a pendant alarm. If you have a fall you press a button that will alert a specific person (relative, friend or neighbour) or company who can come to your home and they will have access to special equipment they can use to help you up from the floor.

Training (Moving and Handling)

If your family or carers feel that training would help them to help you, then it may be possible to arrange training in moving and handling. Ask your physiotherapist for further details.

Further Information

If you would like more information on falls management, please contact Marina Di Marco, Principal Physiotherapist.



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