



Department of
Developmental Disabilities

Office of MUI/Registry Unit

John R. Kasich, Governor
John L. Martin, Director

Health & Safety Alert #20-04-12

Falls

Falls accounted for 7 deaths and 45% of all injuries reported as Major Unusual Incidents (MUI) in Ohio last year. There were even more falls that did not result in major injury but may have negatively impacted an individual with a disability. Falls often lead to fear and a restriction/reduction in physical activities. In some cases, reductions in activities can lead to physical weakness which could actually increase the risk of falling.

Falls and fall related injuries are a significant issue for individuals with developmental disabilities. In addition to the significant risk of injury, falls impact an individual's quality of life, ability to work and level of independence. While environmental factors play a role in falls so does a person's age, medical conditions and medications. This alert addresses facts about falls as well as risk factors for consideration related to falls.

Known Facts about Falls:

- Most falls occur at home when individuals are going about their usual activities of daily living.
- Individuals with a developmental disability may not have the protective reactions to prevent serious injuries when they fall.
- Advanced age and medical condition(s) may increase the possibility of injuries due to falls.
- Ohioans aged 65 and older experienced a 125% increase in the number of fatal falls from 2000-2009 according to the Ohio Department of Health.
- Some medication(s) may have side effects which may contribute to falls.
- The more falls an individual has, the greater the chance of injury.
- Falls and fear of falling can result in a decreased quality of life, reduction in activities, social isolations and depressive symptoms.
- There are numerous risk factors that increase the probability of an individual falling.

Individual Internal Risk Factors:

There are particular conditions that an individual may have or exhibit which are unique to the individual. These factors include but are not limited to:

- a) Lower extremity weakness, upper extremity, or one sided muscle weakness
- b) Balance disorders
- c) Ambulation/Gait difficulties
- d) Visual deficits (cataracts, change in vision)
- e) Use of sedative–hypnotic medications; use of four or more medications including prescribed medication and over the counter medications
- f) Functional and cognitive impairments
- g) Psychotropic medications
- h) Age
- i) Seizure disorder
- j) Chronic or acute pain
- k) Blood pressure, blood thinning and other medications that can cause dizziness when getting up due to a temporary drop in blood pressure upon standing (postural hypotension)

Environmental External Risk Factors:

These are factors related to the environment or environmental conditions. These factors include but are not limited to:

- a) Poor lighting
- b) Slippery floor surfaces or changes in floor surface (e.g. from carpet
- c) Transfers/pivots
- d) Stairs - Lack of handrails
- e) Wires, light cords or other objects in the environment or on the floor which an individual can trip on/over
- f) Ill-fitting or untied shoes or ill-fitting pants

- g) The use of adaptive devices
- h) Uneven walking surfaces
- i) Getting in and out of vehicles
- j) Weather conditions such as ice and rain
- k) Spills or clutter

The following locations were the most frequently identified for falls through MUI data review:

- a) Bathrooms
- b) Bedrooms
- c) Stairs, including those on buses and vans
- d) Falls from one's wheelchair
- e) Doorways
- f) Outdoor uneven surfaces

Common causes included:

- a) Tripping over objects on the floor
- b) Losing balance during transfer pivots and turns
- c) Medical conditions
- d) Seizures
- e) Water/urine on the floor
- f) Peer confrontations

Falls Prevention:

The first step in prevention is to understand why the person is falling. The review should include a history of fall circumstances and identification of possible internal and external risk factors. A professional assessment completed by a nurse, physician, or physical

therapist/occupational therapist may be necessary to identify acute or chronic medical problems, vision issues, and mobility/balance concerns.

Specific recommendations would be based on the findings of the review and assessment but could include:

- Professional evaluation of mobility skills
- Review of both over the counter and prescribed medication that may have side effects that contributing to falls
- Specific supervision requirement/assistance during high risk activities identified by previous assessment. High risk activities might include: standing, sitting, bathing, walking outside and entering/exiting vehicles.
- Exercise program for lower extremity weakness, poor grip strength, balance problems
- Modification or correction of environmental risk factors including lighting, grab bars, hand rails and reflective strips along the door ways
- Treatment of medical problems
- Use of mechanical support devices for assistance with ambulation
- Special adaptive equipment including helmets, gait belts, etc.
- Training for support staff

It is important to realize that any fall has the potential to result in serious harm. Risk factors for falls should be clearly explained to individuals or their guardians along with the benefits or potential risk of any alternative interventions. Information should be included in the support plan/s to help mitigate risks and protect health and safety.

Please make sure that all employees are informed regarding this information to help prevent future injuries from falls.

For questions or comments regarding the above Alert, please contact the MUI/Registry Unit at (614) 995-3810.

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