

Falls Prove Deadly for Older Queenslanders

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Almost 300 older Queenslanders die each year as the result of a fall, according to statistics released today by the Queensland Injury Surveillance Unit (QISU) at the Mater Hospital, to coincide with Seniors Week.

Falls have become the most common cause of injury in people over the age of 65, and are now the cause of approximately 60% of all injury presentations to hospitals.

A staggering one in three older persons in Queensland will fall this year, and as many as 10% of these will need medical treatment, at an estimated cost to the health system of \$85 million – more than the costs associated with traffic related injury.

“While death does occur in extreme cases, the most common injury sustained as a result of a fall is a fracture or dislocation (39%), followed by a sprain or strain (16%), followed by an open wound (16%),” says Dr Simon Journeaux, Director of Orthopaedics at the Mater Adult Hospital.

“One in ten falls result in a hip fracture, which can be very serious and can have long-term effects on mobility and confidence which can then increase the chance of that person falling again.”

Most commonly, falls take place in or around the home (64%), but a significant number also take place in an institution (9%), on or near a road (8%), in hospital (5%) or in a shop or commercial premises (5%).

At home, the bedroom is the site of the most injuries (16%), followed by the living/family/dining room (9%), garden (8%) and footpath (8%). Almost 60% of cases are described as being caused by stumbling, slipping or tripping on the same level.

Who's at Risk?

QISU has identified a number of risk factors that increase the likelihood of a fall. You are most likely to have a fall if you:

- Are a female (females outnumber males 2:1)
- Suffer from a chronic or acute illness;
- Have muscle weakness, osteoporosis or poor vision;
- Are cognitively impaired, eg suffer from Alzheimer's Disease or similar;
- Wear inappropriate footwear or carry heavy cumbersome bags;
- Attempt to perform tasks beyond your capacity, like cleaning gutters or pruning trees;
- Take medications that make you drowsy, or misuse alcohol and drugs; and/or
- Are socially isolated and have few social contacts.

Prevention – Planning for the Future

“Fortunately, there are many steps that persons aged 45 – 64 years can take to protect themselves against falls in the future,” says Dr Journeaux.

“The most important step is to start a regime of moderate exercise, such as Tai Chi, which has been shown to lessen fall related injury. Adopting an exercise regime with a social element is even more beneficial, as the more socially isolated you are, the more likely you are to have a fall.”

“Other lifestyle factors, such as adopting a healthy diet and giving up smoking also help lower the risk,” he says.

“People should also assess their home environment for potential hazards – factors such as poor lighting, slippery showers and loose rugs can create a very dangerous environment. The installation of grab rails and improved lighting can make an enormous difference to the safety of a home,” says Dr Journeaux.

People should also be aware of the effects of their medications, and always check for drug interactions with a GP or chemist. Any devices, such as a cane, walker, or scooter should be kept in good working order and professionally serviced.

To refer to the QISU Injury Bulletin on Falls in the Older Queensland Population please go to the QISU website at www.qisu.org.au.

For an interview with a QISU spokesperson, please contact:

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**QISU data is based on emergency department presentations to the following fourteen hospitals: Mater Children’s Hospital, Mater Adult Hospital, Mater Private Emergency Care Centre, Queen Elizabeth II Hospital, Redland Hospital, Logan Hospital, Royal Children’s Hospital, Mt Isa Hospital, Mackay Base Hospital, Proserpine Hospital, Sarina Hospital, Clermont Hospital, Dysart Hospital, Mareeba Hospital and Moranbah Hospital.*