

Healthy Aging

A simple fall can change everything for older adults

By Raj Kalra, MD

For many older adults, a fall may seem like a simple accident — a momentary loss of balance or a missed step. But for seniors, a fall can sometimes mark the beginning of a significant change in health, mobility, and independence. What appears to be a minor incident can lead to injuries, hospitalizations, and a loss of confidence that affects daily life.

Falls are one of the most common — and often most dangerous — health events affecting older adults. In fact, they are the leading cause of injury-related hospitalizations among adults over the age of 65 in the United States.

What makes a fall so concerning is not just the fall itself, but the chain of consequences that can follow. A broken hip, head injury, or even a minor fracture can dramatically change a senior's ability to live independently. Many older adults who experience a serious fall never fully regain their previous level of mobility or confidence.

One of the most common injuries related to falls is a hip fracture. Recovery can be long and difficult, often requiring surgery, rehabilitation, and months of limited mobility. Unfortunately, many seniors never fully recover their ability to walk independently after such an injury.

Beyond the physical trauma, a fall can also have a significant psychological impact. After falling, many older adults develop a fear of falling again. This fear often leads them to reduce their activity levels, which ironically increases their risk of future falls by weakening muscles and compromising balance.

Several factors contribute to the increased risk of falling as we age. Changes

in vision, balance, and muscle strength are common contributors. Medications also play an important role. Many medications commonly prescribed to older adults — including sleep aids, blood pressure medications, and medications for anxiety or pain — can cause dizziness, sedation, or changes in blood pressure that increase the likelihood of falling. Behaviors associated with dementia — such as wandering, restlessness, or agitation — can also increase fall risk.

Chronic medical conditions, such as Parkinson's disease, neuropathy, arthritis, and dementia, can further increase fall risk. Even dehydration, infections, or sudden illness can make someone unsteady on their feet. In many cases, falls occur when several smaller risk factors combine, rather than from a single cause.

Falls become even more common when memory or cognitive impairment is involved. People living with dementia often experience changes in judgment, spatial awareness, and balance that increase the likelihood of falling. They may forget to use a walker, misjudge distances, or attempt to stand or walk without assistance.

Families are often surprised when falls become more frequent after a dementia diagnosis. In reality, falls are one of the most common complications of cognitive decline. Creating a safe environment, providing supervision when needed, and focusing on strength, mobility, and thoughtful medication management can significantly reduce fall risk.

Environmental hazards in the home are another important contributor to falls. Loose rugs, poor lighting, cluttered walkways, and

uneven flooring can easily lead to a trip or loss of balance. Bathrooms and staircases are particularly high-risk areas. Simple changes — such as installing grab bars, improving lighting, or removing loose rugs — can make a meaningful difference.

Fortunately, many falls are preventable. One of the most effective ways to reduce fall risk is through regular exercise that focuses on strength and balance. Activities such as walking, tai chi, yoga, and physical therapy exercises can improve muscle strength, coordination, and stability.

Medication review is another important step. Older adults should periodically review their medications with their physician or pharmacist to determine whether any of the medications they have been prescribed might increase fall risk, or whether adjustments can be made.

Regular vision and hearing checks are also important. Poor vision can make it difficult to detect obstacles or changes in flooring, while hearing loss can affect spatial awareness and balance. Ensuring that glasses and hearing aids are up to date can help improve overall safety.

For families caring for older loved ones, a fall should be viewed as an important warning sign. It may signal changes in health, mobility, or medication tolerance that deserve attention. Rather than dismissing a fall as “just an accident,” it can be helpful to ask what factors may have contributed and what steps might help prevent another one.

As our community continues to age, fall prevention will become increasingly important. With awareness, proactive care, and supportive environments, many falls can be prevented, helping older adults maintain their independence, safety, and quality of life.

Raj Kalra, MD, is the founder of Aroha Memory Care, a wellness and lifestyle medicine-focused memory care community in Sonoma Valley. Readers are welcome to submit questions about healthy aging, dementia, or senior living for possible discussion in future articles to the Kenwood Press at info@kenwoodpress.com.

COMMUNITY CALENDAR

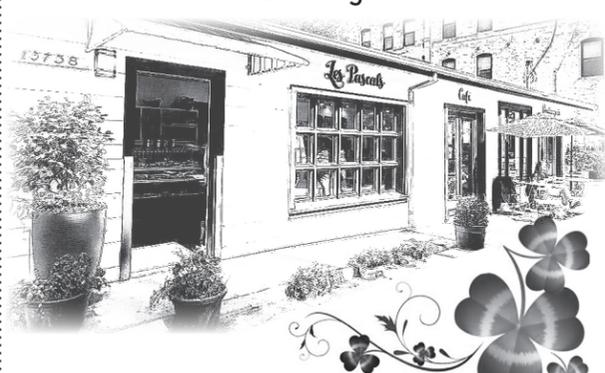
Ongoing

- Mondays** Eldridge AA Meeting, 7 p.m. Glen Ellen Community Church, 5311 O'Donnell Lane, Glen Ellen.
- Tuesdays** Al-Anon Family Group meeting, 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. In-person meetings at Star of the Valley Church (Parish Center next to Church), 495 White Oak, Santa Rosa. Or via Zoom, meeting ID: 118-9024-86; Passcode: circle.
- Wednesdays** AA meeting, 7:30 p.m. St. Patrick's Episcopal Church, 9000 Sonoma Hwy., Kenwood.

Current

- Mar 17** North Sonoma Valley MAC (NSVMAC), 5:30 p.m. at Mayflower Hall, 5311 O'Donnell Lane, Glen Ellen. Zoom info posted online with agenda at sonomacounty.ca.gov.
- Mar 25** Sonoma Valley Citizens Advisory Commission, 6:30 p.m. Zoom meeting ID: 957 4573 3697; Passcode: 290077.
- Apr 4** Sonoma Volunteer Firefighters Association Easter Egg Hunt at Woodland Star School, 10 a.m. This event features, candy, prizes, and a chance to visit the fire truck. 11700 Dunbar Road, Glen Ellen. Event is free, children should bring their own basket
- Apr 4** Kenwood Firefighters Association Easter Egg Hunt at Plaza Park on Warm Springs Road, 9 a.m. sharp. Event is free, treats and eggs are provided, children should bring their own basket.
- Apr 7** Kenwood Press on KSVY radio, 9:20–9:40 a.m. Listen at 91.3 FM or ksvy.org.
- Apr 7** Valley of the Moon Water District Board Meeting, 6:30 p.m. Open to the public. Meeting held at 19039 Bay Street, Sonoma.
- Apr 8** Springs Municipal Advisory Council (SMAC), 6:30 p.m. Zoom ID: 985-4530-4964; Passcode: 404502.

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