

Health & Safety Alert #20-12-09

Falls

Ohio MUI data has revealed that 37% of all injuries reported as MUIs are a result of a fall. There are numerous other falls without injury or only minor injury that also occur and result in an unusual incident. Falls are a significant issue for individuals with developmental disabilities, and each fall has the potential for resulting serious harm. Falls can occur as a result of both internal and external factors. This alert addresses facts about falls as well as risk factors for consideration related to falls.

Known Facts on Falls:

- Most falls occur 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 injury due to a fall.
- The more falls an individual has, the greater the chance of injury.
- 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
- e) Use of sedative – hypnotic medications; use of four or more medications
- f) Functional and cognitive impairments
- g) Psychotropic medications
- h) Age
- i) Seizure disorder
- j) Chronic or acute pain
- k) Cardiac medication that results in positional blood pressure

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 to tile)
- c) Peer involvement
- d) Transfers/pivots
- e) Stairs - Lack of handrails
- f) Wires, light cords or other objects in the environment or on the floor which an individual can trip on/over
- g) Ill-fitting or untied shoes or ill-fitting pants
- h) The use of adaptive devices
- i) Uneven walking surfaces
- j) Getting in and out of vehicles
- k) Weather conditions such as ice and rain
- l) 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 falls 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 medication for those on sedating medications or four or more medications
- Specific supervision requirements during ambulation
- Exercise program for lower extremity weakness, poor grip strength, balance problems
- Modification or correction of environmental risk factors
- 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
- A determination that the risk of injury from falls is greater than alternative ambulation or mobility options

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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