To: Senior Newsletter

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RE: Balance and Preventing Falls

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Approximately 8 million aging Americans report having a chronic problem with balance, in addition to 2.4 million adults report having a chronic problem with dizziness alone. Having good balance means being able to control and maintain your body's position, whether you are moving or remaining still. An intact sense of balance helps you walk without staggering, get up from a chair without falling, and climb stairs without tripping.

Good balance is important to help you get around, stay independent, and carry out daily activities. Many people experience problems with their sense of balance as they get older. Problems of the inner ear are usually the main cause. People feel unsteady, or as if they were moving, spinning, or floating, maybe feeling vertigo which is also a common symptom.

Balance disorders are one reason older people fall. Falls and fall-related injuries, such as hip fractures, can have a serious impact on an older person's life. If you fall, it could limit your activities or make it impossible to live by yourself. Many people often become more isolated after a fall. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than one-third of adults ages 65 years and older fall each year. Among older adults, falls are the leading cause of injury deaths.

There are many types of balance disorders. One of the most common is benign paroxysmal positional vertigo, or BPPV. With BPPV, you experience a brief, intense feeling of
vertigo that occurs when you change the position of your head. Another type of balance disorder is labyrinthitis. This is an infection or inflammation of the inner ear causing dizziness and loss of balance. The labyrinth is the organ in your inner ear that helps you maintain your balance. Meniere's disease is a balance disorder that causes a person to experience vertigo, hearing loss that comes and goes, tinnitus, which is a ringing or roaring in the ears, and a feeling of fullness in the ear. It affects adults of any age. The cause is unknown.

There are many ways to treat balance disorders depending on the cause. See your doctor if you experience dizziness, vertigo, or other problems with your balance. Studies show that a combination of techniques can greatly reduce falls in the older adult population. Experts recommend a physical activity program with balance, strength training, and flexibility components; consulting with a health professional about getting a fall risk assessment; having medications reviewed on a regular basis; getting eyes checked annually; and making sure the home environment is safe and supportive.

Since an injury from falls affects the quality of life, many seniors are choosing to make some changes in their lives to reduce their fall risk. Some simple lifestyle changes include: wearing only sturdy, rubber-soled shoes; cleaning up spills immediately; minimize drinking alcohol; and asking your doctor if medications you take will make you dizzy. Around the home or apartment, a person could reduce their risk of falls by removing loose wires, cords, throw rugs; minimizing clutter; using non-skid tape in the tub or shower; turning on lights when up at night and putting a night light in the bathroom. On the stairs, a person can make sure all the treads, rails, and rugs are secure. Installing non-skid rubber mats near the sink or stove can also reduce the risk of slipping or falling.
At senior centers across Michigan, programs like Matter of Balance and Tai Chi help older adults gain strength, improve balance, and increase confidence to help them live healthier lives and preserve their independence. For free information on fall prevention including information on the Matter of Balance program in Michigan, older adults should contact their local area agency on aging. For information on balance testing consult your health care provider. The Central Michigan University’s Carls Center has a Fall and Balance Clinic for Assessment and Rehabilitation at 989-774-3904.

This article has been provided by Central Michigan District Health Department, which serves the local residents of Arenac, Clare, Gladwin, Isabella, Osceola, and Roscommon Counties. Visit our website at www.cmdhd.org