



## **Sue Ann Says: Take These Steps to Reduce Falling Risks and Maintain Your Independence**

My pooch Emmy Lou expects to be in my lap at all times. She is my faithful shadow, trotting along at my ankles and snoring loudly beside my bed each night. I shouldn't have been so surprised to read a report a few months ago from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). It revealed that almost 90,000 fall injuries each year in the U.S. are associated with household pets, usually dogs. And women are more than twice as likely to be injured as men. Older adults are most likely to suffer fractures.

Who knew that my Emmy Lou and your Fido were such a health hazard?

Because women are so prone to osteoporosis, a fall can result in much more than a few bumps and bruises. Fragile bones put us at great risk for fractures. In fact, a broken hip or other fracture is the leading cause of injury deaths among older adults. Jane Mahoney, MD, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health, told me that one in three older Americans fall every year – and one dies every 35 minutes as a result of a falling injury.

Fractures and non-fatal injuries profoundly impact quality of life. Many adults who suffer falling injuries are admitted to long term care facilities. The psychosocial consequences of falling injuries include loss of independence and mobility, social isolation and depression. In fact, many adults curtail their social activities simply because they are so afraid of falling.

The good news is that falls are preventable. Dr. Mahoney has spent more than 15 years studying the risk factors for falling. In fact, Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation gave its first research grant to Dr. Mahoney 10 years ago. The funding enabled her to study the catalysts for falls in older adults. She helped create Sure Step, a multidisciplinary falling assessment and prevention program. Dr. Mahoney is partnering with other researchers, healthcare and aging services professionals, and community organizations to implement the program statewide. She hopes the curriculum ultimately will be effective on a national basis.

"Most risk factors for falling can be reversed or prevented," Dr. Mahoney told me. "Reducing risk of falls helps older adults continue to lead independent, productive and healthy lives."

### **How you can protect yourself (and your mother)**

Dr. Mahoney urges every older woman to talk with her doctor about her risk factors for falling. If you are at risk, work with a physical therapist to create a personal plan to reduce your risks. And if you are the loved one of an older woman, ensure that she talks with her doctor and takes steps to reduce her falling risks.

Dr. Mahoney's other tips:

- Have your vision checked at least annually and correct your eyeglass prescription as necessary.
- Exercise regularly to improve strength, balance and mobility. Tai Chi is especially helpful.

- If you are 50 or older, have bone density testing and talk with your doctor about your risk for osteoporosis.
- If you have been diagnosed with osteoporosis, follow the medication and treatment program your doctor recommends. Many medications can help prevent, or even reverse, loss of bone mass.
- For women of any age, be sure to take the recommended daily dosage of calcium and vitamin D to help strengthen your bones. Talk with your doctor about using supplements. We absorb vitamin D through sunlight, but because of our northern latitude Wisconsin women typically do not get enough vitamin D. And although we are the dairy state, most Wisconsin women – especially menopausal women – need to boost their calcium intake.
- Review all your prescription and over-the-counter medications with your doctor and pharmacist for possible side effects that could increase your risk of falling. Be especially careful in the first few days after beginning a new medication. Also pay attention to drug warning labels. If the label warns to use caution when driving, that means you also need to use extra caution in walking.
- If you are at risk for falling, work with a physical therapist to improve gait, balance and personal safety.
- Reduce falling hazards in and around your home. That includes training your dog to keep out from under your feet. Reduce clutter, remove throw rugs and be sure you have good lighting. A nurse or physical therapist can assess your home environment and suggest other safety measures and equipment.

If you or someone you care about might benefit from a falls prevention program, talk with your doctor or contact local senior services agencies. Partner with your healthcare providers, maintain your independence, exercise and improve your personal safety. After all, it all begins with a healthy woman!

Yours in good health,



Sue Ann Thompson  
Founder & president  
Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation

*The Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF) is a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF provides programs and conducts educational forums that focus on prevention, early detection, and connecting individuals to resources; produces and distributes the most up-to-date educational and resource materials; and, awards grants and scholarships to women health researchers and community non-profits. Your donations help WWHF reach women all over Wisconsin with the information, resources and tools they need to be healthy. To make a donation or to learn more about WWHF, visit [wwhf.org](http://wwhf.org) or call 1-800-448-5148.*