

A recent report from the U.S. National Trauma Data Bank indicates that falls may become the most common type of trauma injury seen in emergency rooms. Currently 32% of all traumas are due to falls and it is the third highest cause of trauma deaths after car accidents and gun shot wounds.

As the U.S. population ages, falls will become more prevalent, especially among women. It is estimated that 30% of adults older than 65 will have one fall a year. Fortunately, 75% of those who fall do not have any serious injury.

Falls have many causes. In the elderly it is typically due to loss of proprioception in the joints and muscles. Proprioception is the information that the brain uses to determine the position of the body in space. In other words, it is why you can know the location of your hands and feet even with your eyes closed. There are sensors in the ligaments and muscles that detect the position of the joints and this information is sent to the brain and allows the brain to regulate the complex action of walking. This is the basis for coordination.

As we age, these sensors and nerves lose some of their function. This is partly due to the aging process itself. It is also due to inactivity. Most people become more sedentary as they age. The less they use their muscles, the less coordinated they become. Without this important sensory input, it becomes much more likely that a fall will occur.

The risk of falling can be greatly reduced through regular exercise and physical activity. The popular phrase “use it or lose it” applies perfectly in this situation. If you are in, or approaching this age range, I highly recommend that you adopt and maintain a regular exercise program. It will provide many healthy benefits including reducing your risk of falling.