



## ***A Client Safety Module: Understanding Fall Risk Factors***

### **What Will You Learn?**

After finishing this inservice, you will be able to:

1. Discuss how the normal aging process affects a person's risk of falling.
2. List at least three medical fall risk factors.
3. Check an environment for potential safety hazards that could lead to a fall.
4. Describe at least five ways you can help your clients prevent falls.
5. Discuss the proper procedure for reporting a fall.

***We hope you enjoy this Inservice, "Understanding Fall Risk Factors". It's been prepared especially for nursing assistants like you. You work very hard, and we appreciate the effort you make to complete these educational materials. It shows your desire to continue learning and growing in your profession.***

### **If you are studying the inservice on your own, please do the following:**

- Read through **all** the material. You may find it useful to have a highlighting marker nearby as you read. Highlight any information that is new to you or that you feel is especially important.
- If you have questions about anything you read, please ask \_\_\_\_\_.
- Take the quiz. Think about each statement and pick the best answer.
- Check with your supervisor for the right answers. You need **8 correct** to pass!
- Print your name, write in the date, and then sign your name.
- Keep the inservice information for yourself and turn in the quiz page to \_\_\_\_\_ no later than \_\_\_\_\_.
- Show your Inservice Club Membership Card to \_\_\_\_\_ so that it can be initialed.

**THANK YOU!**



## A Client Safety Module: Understanding Fall Risk Factors

### Will Any of Your Clients Fall Down Today?

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You can't answer that question for sure, can you? It's impossible to know for sure which of your clients might fall down. However, by learning about what factors put a person at risk for a fall, you may be able to help your clients avoid future falls.

Every year more than two million Americans fall down, often causing serious injury and substantial medical bills. Falls have become one of the elderly's most serious health issues. About one-third of seniors who live in their own homes have a problem with falling—and injuries, such as a broken hip, are common. This safety issue is often the reason elderly people are admitted to nursing homes or assisted living facilities.

Why are falls such a big deal? Little kids fall down all the time without breaking their hips. One reason for this is that kids tend to fall *forward* onto their hands and knees. When older people fall, they often land hard on their bottoms or backs, putting lots of



***Two-thirds of people who experience a fall will fall again within six months.***

pressure on their hips. Over 200,000 older people break a hip every year!

As a nursing assistant, you give your clients excellent care. You work hard every day to make sure they are clean, warm, fed, comfortable, and *safe*.

The hardest part of your job may be to maintain your clients' safety. For a *few* clients, this may require the use of some kind of restraint, if ordered by the physician. However, for most clients, there are much better ways to prevent falls. Knowing all you can about *why* people fall is the first step.

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306 Brandermill Drive  
Durham, NC 27713  
[www.knowingmore.com](http://www.knowingmore.com)

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## Age Related Fall Risk Factors

As the body changes with age, such things as poor vision, loss of muscle strength, and joint stiffness make elderly people more likely to fall. Here are some additional details about age-related fall risk factors:

- Muscle strength decreases gradually with age. Joint tendons and ligaments lose their flexibility and limit motion. For example, lack of muscle and reduced range of motion can cause *low foot swing*, which might make your clients trip over their own feet. Regular exercise is the key to help your clients remain as independent as possible.



- Reflexes begin to slow as a people age, making it hard for them to react quickly...and "catch" their balance.



- Vision diminishes with advancing age, and this directly effects the sensory systems involved with movement. Depth perception is an important part of vision, as it allows a client to tell how far away certain objects are. As a clients vision worsens, so does his or her depth perception, making it hard to judge distance, easily causing a fall.



- Some people begin to lose their hearing as they get older. If your client doesn't hear well, he many not be aware of obstacles (or other people) in his path. In addition, the ears contain sensory cells that affect the ability to balance. With age, these cells gradually decrease—and cannot be replaced. This means that older people may have a problem keeping their balance.



- Forgetfulness can be a common problem among the elderly. Forgetting where things are located, or how to do certain tasks may create a lot of extra stress for your clients. They could become upset or rushed, increasing their chances of falling.



- As people age, changes in sleep patterns are very common. Many seniors have trouble falling asleep and often wake up after only a few hours. Their daytime fatigue may be so overwhelming that they have trouble participating in normal activities. Falls can occur during a restless night, especially in a dark room. If your clients fail to get a good night's sleep, they may be prone to falling during the daytime, too.



## Medical Fall Risk Factors

Many diseases and disorders, such as Parkinson's Disease and arthritis, put patients at risk for falls. Clients who take several different medications are also at risk. Here are some additional medically related fall risk factors:

- Arthritis can cause permanent crippling, nonreversible effects that put a person at high risk for a fall. In addition, some injuries to the knees, hips, and back do not heal completely, causing limited range of motion.



- Osteoporosis is a condition that causes bones to become weak and "brittle". Elderly women are at risk for osteoporosis, meaning that even a slight fall can lead to a severely broken bone. Recent studies have shown that taking vitamin D daily may help reduce the risk of serious injury.

- Sore feet, from foot disorders such as nail problems, corns, blisters or heel pain, can also cause falls.
- Some of your clients may experience a drop in blood pressure upon standing. Known as orthostatic hypotension, this problem can be caused by a number of conditions, including diabetes, Parkinson's disease, heart failure, dehydration, infection, and a number of medications (such as diuretics and blood pressure medicines). The sudden drop in BP can cause dizziness, leading to a fall.
- The side effects of some medicines can upset balance and cause a fall. Medicines for depression, sleep problems and high blood pressure often cause falls. Some medicines for diabetes and heart conditions can also affect a person's balance.



- People who take four or more medications are at high risk for falling, especially if any of their medications have changed in the past two weeks.
- Sometimes, a client may have a hard time controlling his bladder due to a medical condition. This problem can increase the chances of a fall. Your client could easily trip or stumble on something as he hurries to get to the bathroom.
- Being mentally or cognitively impaired puts a person at high risk for a fall. This includes people diagnosed with mental retardation, autism or dementia.



**Falls are the leading cause of accidental death in people over age 65.**

## Environmental Fall Risk Factors

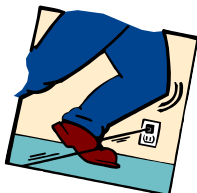
Falls can have simple everyday causes, such as tripping over something on the floor, stumbling on a loose rug, or falling at night on the way to the bathroom. In fact, there could be many potential safety hazards in your client's environment, including:

- Wet walking surfaces.
- Loose area rugs or mats.



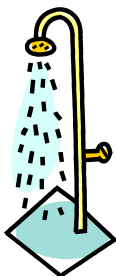
- Highly polished floors.
- Frayed or torn carpeting.
- Clutter on the floor.

- Electrical cords on the floor.
- Uneven stairs.



- Stairs without handrails.
- Poorly fitting shoes or slippers.

- Poor lighting.
- Slippery bathtub or shower.



- Ice, snow, mud or fallen leaves.

### Some Frightening Statistics About Falls in Nursing Homes

*While half of all falls happen in private homes, some recent studies showed the high risk for falls among nursing home residents:*

- **Every year, there are from 100 to 200 reported falls in the typical 100-bed nursing home.**
- **As many as 75% of all nursing home residents fall down every year.**
- **Many people who live in nursing homes experience two or more falls per year.**
- **Each year, about 1800 residents die as a result of falling down.**

Remember...people who live in nursing homes are generally more frail than seniors who live out in the community. They tend to be older, have more chronic illnesses (including dementia) and are often physically dependent. They represent a special challenge when it comes to fall prevention due to these high number of risk factors. All over America, nursing assistants are working hard, along with their coworkers, to reduce these alarming statistics.



**Remember that the more risk factors a person has, the greater the chance of a fall. Some of your clients may have a *dozen* or more risk factors, making them highly prone to falling down.**

## How You Can Help Prevent Falls

*Try following these tips during your daily work. You'll be doing your part to prevent your clients from falling.*

- When you begin caring for a new client, ask your supervisor if that client has any disease or condition that might cause falls. Also, ask if the client has a history of falling. The more you know about your clients, the better prepared you will be to keep them safe.
- Remember, some clients feel that using a cane, walker or wheelchair is a sign of age or weakness. They may not want to admit that they are getting older or weaker. If your clients are not using their equipment as ordered, ask them how they feel about it. Report your conversation to your supervisor.
- Encourage your clients to stay as active as possible. Help them get some kind of daily exercise. If your client is being treated by a physical therapist, ask the therapist what you can do to help your client stay active.
- A person's flexibility becomes limited as he or she grows older. Bending to pick up things or reaching for a phone can be tough. Try doing some daily stretching exercises with your client.
- If you notice a client's memory changing, let your supervisor know.
- Alert your supervisor know if you notice a client's hearing or vision getting worse.



- If necessary, help your clients move from a sitting to a standing position or when getting in and out of bed. When you help move a high risk client from the bed to a chair, for example, be especially careful about supporting the person throughout the transfer.
- For clients with a history of dizziness, encourage them to sit on the side of their bed for a few minutes before attempting to stand.
- If your client complains about falling out of bed, suggest that bedrails be installed for added security.
- If your clients use hospital beds, make sure they are secured in the lowest position and use side rails as ordered.
- If a client is new to your facility, make sure he or she is familiar with the environment, including the location of the bathroom, light switches and the call bell.
- If your facility uses bed or chair alarms to help prevent falls, be sure you and your client understand how they work.
- As a precaution, ask your clients to leave the bathroom door unlocked at all times. If a fall occurs while they are inside a locked room, giving them assistance will be tough!



## More Tips For Preventing Falls

- For your clients with Foley catheters, make sure the tubing is taped securely to keep them from tripping. If the tubing is loose, they could easily trip over it while walking.
- Report a client's dizziness, confusion or disorientation to your supervisor. Sometimes these symptoms are a side effect of multiple medications, and will go away if the doctor adjusts the medications.

- Report any change in a client's blood pressure to your supervisor. If your client's blood pressure drops when he stands up, he could become unbalanced and fall.

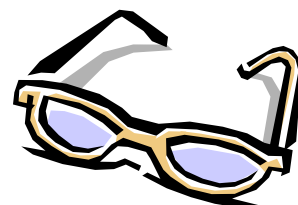


- When you begin caring for a new client, ask your supervisor if that client has any disease or condition that might cause falls. Also, ask if the client has a history of falling. The more you know about your clients, the better prepared you will be to keep them safe.
- Help educate clients about the risk factors for falls. By learning more, they may feel more in control and more confident about avoiding falls.
- Assist your clients to the bathroom as needed. You should check with your clients often to see if they need to use the bathroom—so you avoid a “last minute” rush that may lead to a fall.
- Keep your clients' environment as free from clutter as possible.

- Be sensitive to how your clients feel about their ability to avoid a fall. Studies have shown that a fear of becoming dependent on others causes elderly people to *keep quiet* about their falls. Because many high-risk clients need help moving around their space, they may begin to feel dependent—and they may resent needing your help. If a client resists your help in assisting them move from place to place, don't take it personally. Do let your supervisor know that you are having a hard time assisting your client.



- If your clients need glasses, they should wear them as ordered. However, keep in mind that bifocals might make it difficult for someone to focus properly during ambulation. If you have questions about whether or not a client should wear glasses while walking, talk to your client's nurse.



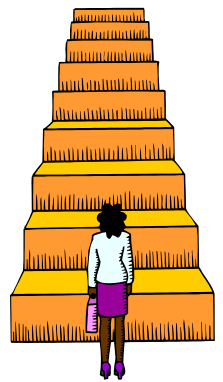
- If your workplace has a special way to identify clients who are high risk for falling, be sure you have been oriented to the system. Common identification methods include putting special stickers on charts, decorative pins on a client's clothing or having clients wear bright colored wrist bands.

## And...Still More Tips For Preventing Falls

- Encourage your clients to wear shoes that are suitable for walking, instead of loose slippers or sandals. Shoes with low-heels and light, non-skid soles are the best. Also, make sure that any laces are tied tightly. Loose shoes and untied laces can both cause a damaging fall.
- Make sure that all rugs are tacked down tightly. Loose rugs can be very dangerous and are easy to trip over.
- Keep the everyday items used by your clients within their reach, so that they don't have to stretch to get what they need. For example, many cupboards in the kitchen are hard to reach without stretching or standing on a chair. Recommend to your clients that they keep medications and other items on low counters or tables where they can better reach them.
- Make sure that all loose cords, such as telephone wires, are tucked under furniture or placed where they will not be tripped over.
- Wipe up any spills on the floor immediately. A wet floor is very slippery, and could easily cause a fall.
- Make sure the client's area is well lit during the day and has a nightlight during the night.



- Check that the bathtub and/or shower has a nonskid surface. Wet bathtubs can be very dangerous places!
- Keep the client's living environment, especially the floor, free from clutter. Anything, including magazines, newspapers or shoes, could easily be tripped over.
- Make sure your clients have a clear pathway to walk through in their homes or personal area. Many times, large furniture can obstruct a path, making it hard for them to move about with ease.
- Check stairways for anything that may be a safety hazard. Close to ten percent of falls happen while going up or down the stairs. Poor lighting, clutter, and low visibility could cause this type of fall. Assist your clients to climb stairs as necessary.



**Be sure to report any and changes that you observe in each client's physical, mental or emotional status. Even *small* changes could trigger the need for your supervisor to do a reevaluation of a client's risk of falling.**



## The “Get Up and Go” Test

This is a simple test that makes it easy to tell if a client is sturdy on his or her feet.

1. The first step is to have your client sit in a chair with an upright back.
2. Next, ask the person to stand. Don't allow him to use the armrests to push himself up unless absolutely necessary.
3. Ask the client to remain standing once he is up.
4. If you notice him swaying or hesitating, then he is probably at risk for a fall.
5. Next, ask the person to walk about ten feet, turn around, walk back, and sit down.
6. Clues that a client has trouble with this test may include any of the following: hesitating, stumbling, taking small steps, moving slowly, or asking for help.
7. If your client exhibits any of these risk factors, you should report and document your findings.



## Assistive Devices May Help Your Clients!

There are many different types of devices that could help your clients gain independence. Often, after a fall, many clients are left with limited ability. With the help of an assistive device, they may be able to perform simple everyday tasks and more!

- **Canes**

These simple devices are used as an “assistant” to help clients with balance as needed.



- **Scooters & Motorized Chairs**

Usually, scooters are used for clients who get tired easily. This device gives them the chance to move freely without becoming fatigued.

- **Walkers**

There are a variety of walkers that can be used in place of canes and scooters. They give more support since they are double-sided. Your clients must have some upper body strength, however, to lift the device as they walk.

## Preparing Your High-Risk Clients for a Fall

- The first step to fall prevention is letting your clients know about all the risk factors. Once they become aware of what could cause a fall, your clients might think twice about doing certain tasks. Together, you and your clients can lower the chances of falling down.
- If you work with clients who are high risk, tell them the steps to follow if a fall occurs while they are alone. Here they are:
  1. *Try to remain calm. Panicking could cause further injury and/or trauma. Try to assess if you have been hurt.*
  2. *Either slide along the floor or try using a wall for support to get to a standing position. If it is impossible to get up, remain still and yell for help.*
  3. *If you can, find a phone and dial 9-1-1. It is very important to get checked out for any injuries if a fall occurs.*

## If You Observe a Fall...

Follow your workplace policy for getting help for your client. In addition, pay close attention to—and report—the following information:

### Symptoms

Be sure to report any symptoms that you noticed prior to the client falling down. Among many others, these might include dizziness, shortness of breath, confusion, loss of balance, tripping, slipping or pain.

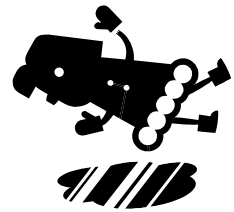


### Previous Falls

Have you witnessed this client falling down at other times in the last three to six months? Does there seem to be a pattern to how and when the client falls? Share any information you have about the client's history of falls.

### Location

Be sure to report where the fall happened and if there were any environmental factors involved—such as a wet floor, cluttered pathway or untied shoelaces.

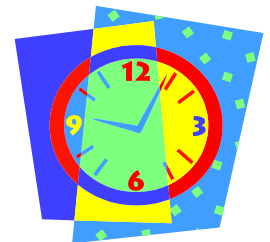


### Activity

Report any physical changes you may have noticed in the days or hours before the fall. This includes any problems with ambulation, toileting and transfers.

### Time

Take note of the time of day or night when the fall occurred. If the fall happened at night, let your supervisor know which, if any, lights were on in the room.



### Trauma

Report any injuries that you noticed, as well as any complaints of pain made by the client after the fall.

*HINT: Keep this SPLATT tool in mind if YOU ever fall down while at work. You'll need to report the same information regarding your own fall.*

## Employees Fall Down Too!

*Keeping your clients safe is an important part of your job. However, in order to do your job, you must keep yourself free from injury, too! Consider these facts:*

- Employee falls are a serious safety concern in the workplace. Each year, falls are responsible for over 300,000 employee injuries.
- Slips and trips are the most common types of work-related accidents.



- Across the United States, nearly 20% of employees who miss work are recovering from a fall.
- Workplace falls cost several billion dollars per year in lost wages, health care expenses, legal costs and workers' compensation claims.
- Employees over the age of 55 are more likely to suffer a fall than younger workers.

## How You Can Avoid a Fall

***Protect yourself from falling down by following these tips:***

- Watch out for wet floors and/or spills on floors.
- Avoid climbing on stools or chairs to reach high objects.
- Wear non-skid shoes that fit you properly.
- Make sure you have adequate light to perform your job safely.
- Have your eyes checked every year or two.
- Get regular exercise. Activities that strengthen your "core muscles" (back and abdomen) enhance your ability to balance yourself.
- Educate yourself about the side effects of any prescription medications you take. (Dizziness is a common side effect!)
- If you spot a problem in your workplace that you feel may present a safety hazard to employees, report it to your supervisor immediately.

## If You Fall Down...

- Call for help, if necessary.
- Try to evaluate all the factors that contributed to your fall.
- Complete an incident report according to your workplace policy. For the report, you'll need to document all the facts about your fall. (The SPLATT tool comes in handy for this.)
- Get medical attention, if necessary.
- Learn what you can from the situation. Could you have done something differently to avoid the fall? Is there a safety hazard at your workplace that can be fixed? Your experience may help prevent future falls.





# IN THE KNOW

YOUR SOURCE FOR GNA INSERVICES

## A Client Safety Module: Understanding Fall Risk Factors

Are you "in the know" about fall risk factors? Circle the best choice, or fill in your answer. Then check your answers with your supervisor!

1. TRUE or FALSE

There is nothing you can do to prevent falls caused by age-related or medical risk factors.

2. \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ are the most common types of work-related accidents.

3. TRUE or FALSE

Many older people are admitted to nursing homes because of problems with falling.

4. TRUE or FALSE

The best shoes for preventing falls are loose slip-ons so the client doesn't have to bend over to put them on.

5. TRUE or FALSE

Helping a client get some kind of regular exercise is an important way to prevent falls.

6. Medical fall risk factors include:

- A. Osteoporosis
- B. Poor lighting
- C. Wet floors
- D. Changes in sleep patterns

7. To report a fall, remember that the "P" in SPLATT stands for:

- A. Physical changes
- B. Problems with ambulation
- C. Previous falls
- D. Pain

8. TRUE or FALSE

Many elderly people keep their falls a secret because they fear becoming dependent on others.

9. TRUE or FALSE

A client who takes three different medications every day may be at high risk for falling.

10. TRUE or FALSE

It is important for you to know if your client has a history of falling.

EMPLOYEE NAME (Please print):

\_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

- I understand the information presented in this inservice.
- I have completed this inservice and answered at least eight of the test questions correctly.

EMPLOYEE SIGNATURE:

\_\_\_\_\_

SUPERVISOR SIGNATURE:

\_\_\_\_\_

<b>Inservice Credit:</b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Self Study	1 hour
<input type="checkbox"/> Group Study	1 hour

File completed test in employee's personnel file.