



*Teresa Smith Keil, FNP-C*

## *Hometown Quality Care*

### HAVE YOU HAD A FALL THIS YEAR?

Falls are the leading cause of fatal and non-fatal injuries in people over the age of 65. This risk increases as we get older and more fragile. Overall, around one third of people over the age of 65 fall each year. Up to 75 percent of people who fall and break their hip never recover to the point before the fracture. The risk of falling greatly increases this time of year when travel and increased activity is combined with hazardous snow and ice conditions.

In an effort to prevent falls, Benefis Teton Medical Center is doing risk assessments on older patients and is encouraging vitamin D supplementation and exercise. A patient is considered high risk if they have had several falls or have been injured by a fall within the last 12 months. Moderate risk patients have balance and strength problems or are unsteady when they walk, but have not fallen. There are three major factors that increase your risk of falling—illness, a recent change in medication, and an unsafe or unfamiliar setting. Talk with your provider if you are worried about falling and be sure to tell them if you experience any falls. There are multiple things that your provider can do to help. One is to evaluate all your medications to see if they may be contributing to your unsteadiness or dizziness. Your provider may also examine your feet for numbness, soreness, or improper footwear. Examining vision acuity is important to make sure a person can see obstacles clearly. Setting up an exercise program, particularly for strengthening and balance, is essential as well. Lack of exercise leads to weakness, poor balance, and falls.

Occupational or physical therapy professionals can assist with a home safety evaluation and provide recommendations to help prevent falls. Removing throw rugs, electrical cords, and other obstacles from walking paths will help prevent tripping. Keep items you use regularly in cabinets you can reach easily without having to use a step stool. Place grab bars around the toilet and shower. Improve the lighting in your home. Utilize handrails and good lighting in stairways. When going up or down stairs, you will be much safer if you can see your feet – get someone to help if you must move things up or down stairs. Wear well-fitting shoes with good support inside and outside your house. Avoid slippers or flip-flops. If your therapist or provider suggests an assistive device like a cane or walker, be sure you have the right size and know how to use it correctly. Move more slowly and watch where you step.

Finally, if you do experience a fall, tell your provider so they can help figure out why you fell and how to help reduce your risk for falling again. Your provider can do an exam, talk to you about your medicines, health problems, and activities, and then put together a plan to help you avoid falls in the future. Be careful and stay safe!

