

## Deadly falls high among Lee seniors

By PETE BISHOP

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BONITA SPRINGS — The cause can be as simple as a loose extension chord on the floor, clutter near a high traffic hallway or poor lighting. But the effect can be tragic for a senior — a fall that turns deadly.

Fatal falls happen more than twice as often in Lee County as in other parts of the state, according to numbers released by the Florida Department of Health.

In 2007, 122 seniors died from falls in this county, a rate of more than 21 per 100,000 seniors. That compares to 9 deaths from falls per 100,000 seniors statewide.

"We really don't know why it is so high here, unfortunately," said Diane Holm, spokesperson for Lee County's public safety department.

"Collier and Charlotte counties aren't as high, so we can't attribute it to our climate," she said. "We have had a tremendous influx of senior population, but nonetheless the rate is disproportionate."

Holm said falls among seniors account for more EMS visits to Lee homes than any other incident category except heart disease.

More than four times as many seniors died in Lee from falls than from traffic accidents in 2007.

Most falls happen at home or near the home, said Dr. Lowell Gerson, a Bonita Springs resident who is spearheading efforts to lower the rate as chairman of the Lee County Injury Prevention Coalition.

"We have to recognize that falling is not a normal part of aging," said Gerson. "Falls are preventable."

Gerson said the high number of falls in Lee might be attributable to an older population of seniors.

"My suspicion is that we may have a greater number of older seniors than the rest of the state," he said.

According to the National Council on Aging, one in three seniors over age 65 falls each year, while that number increases to one in two seniors by age 80.

Nearly 85 percent of deaths from falls are among people 75 and older, according to the CDC.

In addition to death, falls can cause seniors to permanently lose mobility and independence. And one fall can contribute to more falls, even if the initial fall doesn't result in serious injury.

"Fear of falling is a consequence of that first fall," said Gerson. "If someone says they are afraid of falling and decides they won't do anything because of that fear, it actually increases their chances of having another fall."

"A senior might fall riding a bicycle, then decide they are too old for that activity," explained Holm. "Then they don't get sufficient activity to maintain their muscle tone and balance, so they are likely to fall again anyway."

Other seniors who fall might suffer a decline in health and even die months later because an existing medical condition worsens during subsequent inactivity. But those deaths are not included in the statistics.

"That is not an uncommon scenario," said Gerson. "Of the 122 deaths cited, death was an immediate consequence of the fall, more than half of them from traumatic brain injury."

Gerson hopes to establish countywide programs that educate seniors and their families about falls.

Other organizations involved include Lee Memorial Health System, area nursing homes and physical therapists and organizations like the Area Agency on Aging of Southwest Florida.

One goal is to educate seniors about simple steps to take that make a fall less likely, including clearing their homes of clutter, removing throw rugs, installing nightlights and support rails and checking their vision regularly.

Another is to make physical fitness and balance programs more accessible.

"Public awareness is number one, helping people understand that falling is not a normal part of the aging process," said Holm. "And staying active is how you prevent it from happening."

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