

MARY FREE BED

As winter arrives, so does risk for falls

By Tricia Boot

Slippery sidewalks and icy steps are an annual reminder to slow down so you don't fall down.

But as health care professionals attest, awareness and prevention should be a year-round consideration for all ages.

Jennifer McWain, a physical therapist in the Outpatient Therapy Center at Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Hospital in Grand Rapids, said falls are one of the more common causes of unintentional injury.

Still, the topic gets little attention. "You don't open up a 'Health' magazine and read about fall risk," McWain said.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports millions of Americans 65 years and older fall each year. Annually, more than 700,000 people are hospitalized in the United States because of a fall injury.

Head injuries and hip fractures are the most common among those injuries. Falls also are the leading cause of traumatic brain injuries, especially for children younger than 4 and adults 75 and older.

Patient statistics at Mary Free Bed reflect national trends. From April through September, falls — from ladders, stairs and a general loss of balance — were the second-leading cause of admission to the hospital's inpatient brain injury and multiple trauma program.

During a similar five-month reporting period, nearly half of admissions to the inpatient traumatic spinal cord injury program were because of falls.

Meanwhile, a significant number of people seek outpatient rehabilitation at Mary Free Bed because of fall-related injuries, such as hip fractures, concussions and spinal cord injuries.

"I'd estimate that more than half of the patients I work with in the Outpatient Therapy Center have been affected by falls," McWain said.

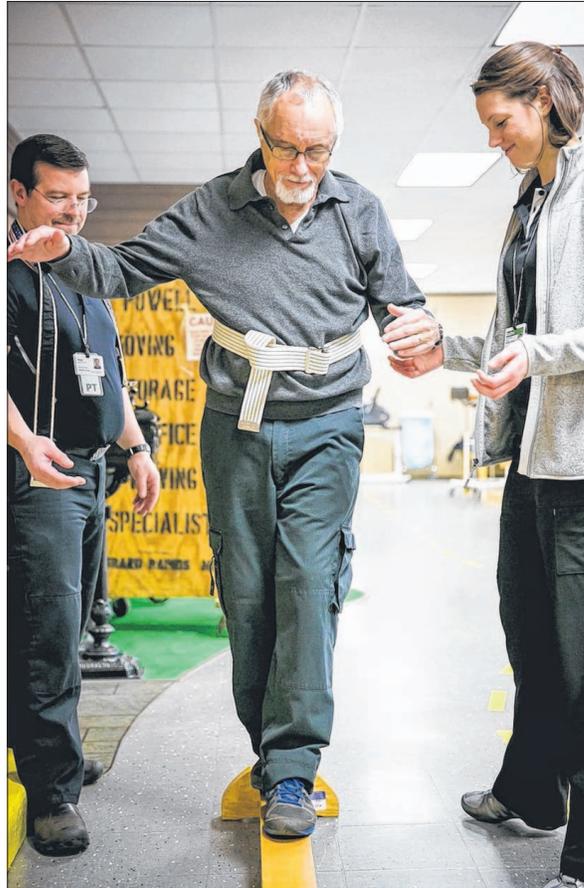
Fall prevention is a primary focus for all patients at Mary Free Bed, not just those who have experienced a fall.

"We're screening for anything that puts any patient at risk for falling," McWain added.

Therapists and nurses assess for three key factors: muscular strength, peripheral sensation and vestibular sense (balance).

Vision, prescription medications and patient confidence also can play a factor.

"We start by identifying what is creating a lack of confidence," McWain said. "We coordinate with a patient's doctor to look at medications that cause dizziness or that present other fall risks. We work on improving strength. We develop strategies for peripheral neuropathy."



Fall prevention is an important part of rehabilitation. Above, Mary Free Bed therapists safely guide Kurt Kaiser on balance exercises. (Submitted photo)

TIP SHEET

FALL PREVENTION

Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Hospital's Outpatient Therapy Center offers these tips to avoid slips, trips and falls:

- Exercise caution when using prescription drugs with side effects, such as dizziness or drowsiness.
- Avoid clutter in the home, especially in high-traffic areas.
- Wipe up spills right away.
- Install grab bars around the toilet and in the shower/tub.
- Wear non-skid boots in icy, rainy and snowy conditions.
- Store commonly used items on lower shelves or countertops.
- Install light switches at the top and bottom of stairways.
- Use rough textured paint or abrasive strips on outdoor steps.
- Mark bottom and top steps with fluorescent tape.
- Keep bath mat off floor when not in use.

Each customized rehabilitation plan is designed to accentuate a patient's strengths and minimize risk factors, such as muscular weakness or diminished coordination. Specialized programs, such as vestibular rehabilitation and Steady Steps and Balance, are available to patients in need of a particular focus for fall prevention.

McWain encourages anyone, regardless of age or health background, to schedule an appoint-

ment with a primary care physician at the first signs of unsteadiness or after a minor fall.

A doctor can determine next steps and make a referral to the appropriate program if fall risks are present. This proactive approach can help minimize the risk of serious injury or disability.

"Getting it addressed right away is so much better than waiting," McWain said. "It's always better to nip any problem in the bud."