

Exercise May Help Older Cancer Patients Avoid Falls

Physical activity strengthens muscles, improves balance and can help prevent falling.

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Conversations between older people with cancer and their health care providers may lead to increased physical activity that reduces the risk of falling. Falls can lead to serious problems, such as head injury or bone fractures, and are a leading cause of death for the elderly population. Physical activity strengthens muscles, improves balance and can help prevent falling.

Researchers at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute analyzed data from more than 100,000 Medicare recipients over age 65 undergoing cancer treatment. They asked participants whether they had discussed physical activity with health care providers and whether they had experienced a fall.

More than half (57%) recalled starting a conversation about physical activity, and 51% said their doctors had advised them that increased physical activity could help reduce their risk of falling. Overall, the incidence of falls remained stable, at about 30%. However, people who had discussed physical activity and those who had received advice to increase their activity were 21% less likely to have experienced a fall. This study did not analyze actual changes in exercise, but people who started conversations and received advice may have been more motivated to increase their physical activity.

“This study highlights that counseling about physical activity may reduce fall risk,” says Eleonora Teplinsky, MD, of Valley Health System. “Physical activity has many other benefits as well and should be considered as part of routine oncologic care.”
