



▶ AGING WITH DISABILITIES:
EFFECTS ON THE SENSES.. 1



▶ STAYING SAFE: PREVENTING
FALLS..... 2



▶ "FACT FOCUS"
HIGHLIGHTS KEY PARTS OF
EACH STORY

○ ISSUE 2 | ○ VOLUME 1 | ○ SPRING 2006

The Safety Net

A PUBLICATION OF THE CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF DEVELOPMENTAL SERVICES

PROMOTING CHOICE AND OPTIONS IN THE COMMUNITY
FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

Aging with Disabilities: Effects on the Senses

Like everyone, adults with developmental disabilities may experience age-related declines in their vision, hearing, movement and balance, taste, and smell. However, people with developmental disabilities may experience these sensory declines at an earlier age than others, and may be less able to express what kind of trouble they are having. This means that adults with developmental disabilities may require more assistance from support providers as they grow older.

Changes in Vision: Eye problems become more common as people age. Older people are more likely to have dry, scratchy eyes and eye infections, and often lose the ability to see things in sharp focus. **What to watch for:** As a support provider, be aware of behavior such as squinting, rubbing the eyes, shutting or covering one eye, tilting or thrusting the head, or holding things very close to the face to look at them. **What to do:** Make sure that older people you support have regular eye exams. You can also make lighting brighter.

Changes in Hearing: Older people often find it hard to hear high-pitched tones. This makes it difficult for them to focus on someone's voice if there is background noise. **What to watch for:** Be alert for signs of hearing loss, such as turning up the volume on the TV or radio, speaking loudly, or withdrawing from social situations. **What to do:** Make sure people have their hearing tested. When speaking to an older person, look directly at him or her, speak

clearly and slowly, and allow the person time to sort out what you have said.

Changes in Taste and Smell: The senses of taste and smell get weaker as people age. Older people are less likely to feel thirsty, even when their bodies need water. **What to watch for:** Since older consumers may not be able to taste or smell their food as well as they did before, they may not eat as much. You should also be aware of odors on the bodies and clothing of older adults. **What to do:** You can add more seasonings to the food you prepare, *although salt should be avoided*. Check whether food tastes or smells spoiled. You may also have to remind older people to drink enough water to avoid dehydration.

Changes in the Skin: As people get older, their skin becomes thinner, dryer, and more likely to break. This can cause pressure sores in those with limited mobility. Our skin also becomes less able to adjust to temperatures that are too warm or too cold. **What to watch for:** Examine skin for cuts, burns, and pressure sores. People may wear jackets indoors if they feel cold, and they may sweat or remove clothing if they feel hot. **What to do:** To prevent dry and flaky skin, thoroughly and gently rinse away soap after baths, dry the skin, and apply moisturizing lotion. Make sure that people who cannot move by themselves are frequently repositioned. Try to maintain a comfortable indoor temperature. Make sure that hot and cold water faucets are easy to identify, and easy to turn on and off.



Changes in Movement and Balance: As we grow older, our muscles lose their strength and tone, and joints become more difficult to move. Bones break more easily, especially in women. People with developmental disabilities can be more likely to experience physical changes that affect their balance and mobility. **What to watch for:** Those having trouble with balance or mobility may move slowly or unsteadily, or use walls or furniture to help them balance. **What to do:** Promote regular exercise, especially using weights, to help strengthen bones and muscles. (See <http://www.nchpad.org/Articles/9/Exercise~and~Fitness>.) Talk to the person's doctor about assistive devices. To prevent falls, you can install stair railings and non-skid strips on stairs and in bathtubs.

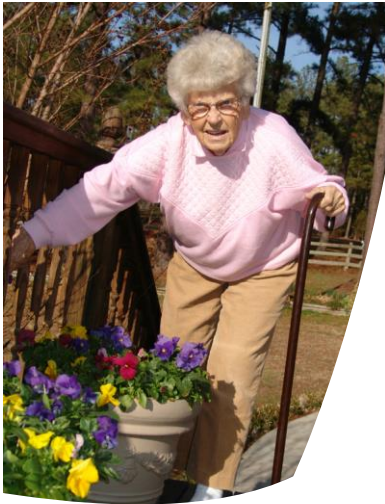
Remember - regular check-ups, including vision and hearing testing, are an important part of good preventive health care! Schedule an appointment with a doctor if you think that a person you support is having trouble seeing or hearing, or has developed problems maintaining balance.



FACT FOCUS: Know what to do if someone falls:

If someone in your care falls, you should carefully and quickly assess the situation:

1. **Listen** to what the person is telling you.
2. **Observe** the position of the person's body and look for signs of bleeding, broken bones, or breathing problems.
3. **Ask** the individual what he or she is feeling.
4. **Seek help** if a person appears to be seriously hurt, is bleeding badly, or complains of sharp pain. Call 911 for emergency help!
5. **Notify** the person's physician about the incident.



Staying Safe: Preventing Falls

All of us have fallen at one time or another. While most falls do not cause any serious injuries, some falls can cause problems, such as broken bones or severe cuts. Occasionally, falls can even cause death.

Certain health conditions can make some people more likely to fall than others. For instance, people with epilepsy sometimes experience hard falls during their seizures, and people with cerebral palsy often have muscle problems that can cause them to fall. Elderly people are also more likely to fall due to changes in their senses, such as declining eyesight and problems with balance (see article on “Aging with Disabilities” in this newsletter for more information).

There are some things that support providers can do to help to prevent people in their care from falling.

Increase indoor safety by:

- Being sure that individuals who need assistive devices (canes, walkers) use them properly.
- Keeping cords, wires, and hoses out of walkways.
- Providing hand rails and guardrails at all elevated walkways or stairs.

- Installing safety adaptations in the shower – such as a rubber mat, a shower bench, or grab bars.
- Keeping floors dry and clutter free.
- Installing night lights in bedrooms, halls, and bathrooms.
- Being sure that nothing is left on stairways or on the floor.
- Using non-skid matting under floor rugs.
- Putting carpet on the stairs, or use a rubber runner.
- Replacing worn out carpet and making sure it doesn't come loose.

Increase outdoor safety by:

- Providing good outdoor lighting on walks and driveways.
- Putting sand or salt on porches and walkways when it is icy.
- Reminding people who are at risk of falling to slow down.

Even with the best planning and precautions, some falls will still happen. Once you become aware that someone has fallen down, you should quickly assess the situation to decide what to do. To assess the situation, you should listen to what the person who has fallen is saying about how they feel, ask questions to get more details, and look for signs of bleeding or broken bones.

If the individual who has fallen appears to be seriously hurt, you should call 911 for emergency help. You should not move the person until help arrives.

Health Care and Aging: Key Screening Recommendations for Older Adults (Ages 50 and up)

- Vision and hearing screenings: annually.
- Bone density measurement: once for all women over 55; earlier for those with limited mobility or hypothyroidism.
- Blood pressure check: annually.
- Glucose test: every 3 years after age 45.
- Mammogram: annually for women.
- Rectal exam: annually for men.

Source: Massachusetts Dept. of Mental Retardation, Health Promotion and Coordination Initiative. For more information, go to <http://www.mass.gov/dmr/>.

FYI: Resource Links for Better Living



For information on aging with disabilities and preventing falls, you can visit the following websites:

Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Aging with Developmental Disabilities
<http://www.rtcadd.org/>

Growing Older with a Developmental Disability: Physical and Cognitive Changes and Their Implications
https://depts.washington.edu/aedd/growing_older_dd_Factor.html

Older Adults with Developmental Disabilities and their Aging Family Caregivers
<http://www.rtcadd.org/publications/blog/files/724e715b6a96414d9537bdf3992ce85e-89.html>

The National Center on Physical Activity and Disability
<http://www.ncpad.org/>

Fall Prevention
<http://www.aota.org/Practice/Productive-Aging/Falls/Toolkit.aspx>

May is National Older Americans Month!
Go to www.aoa.gov for more information

Check out www.ddssafety.net for more information that can help individuals with developmental disabilities live a healthier and happier life!

The site is translated in Spanish and Tagalog!