

Standing up to falls: Exercise classes, programs help Clark County seniors avoid injury, stay safe at home

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Published: January 9, 2024, 6:03am

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Fitness instructor Barbara Dunlap, center, leads local seniors in an hourlong strength-and-balance class called Enhance Fitness, sponsored by the Area Agency on Aging & Disability of Southwest Washington, at Bethel Lutheran Church in Brush Prairie. (Typical attendance on a non-holiday week is 18 to 20, Dunlap said.) (Amanda Cowan/The Columbian) [Photo Gallery](#)

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BRUSH PRAIRIE — When you hit it unexpectedly, the ground turns out to be so unforgivingly hard.

Not to mention, humiliating.

As many as 1 in 4 older Americans takes an accidental tumble to the ground each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. But about half of those don't tell their doctors. Why not?

“As adults, we pride ourselves on having mastery of our physical bodies,” said Patti Atkins, communications specialist for the state-sponsored Area Agency on Aging & Disabilities of Southwest Washington. “We don't want to admit we can't do things. We don't want to admit it to ourselves, or to our children and families, and maybe not even to our physicians.”

But there's no hiding a real emergency. One out of five falls causes a serious injury, like a hip fracture or traumatic brain injury. As many as 3 million older people are treated for fall injuries in hospital emergency departments each year, and over 800,000 are hospitalized, according to the CDC.

Fortunately, Atkins said, the Area Agency on Aging & Disabilities of Southwest Washington provides robust resources aimed at keeping local seniors safe, stable and enjoying life exactly where they want to be: right at home.

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The week after Christmas, The Columbian sampled a free, ongoing senior-fitness program that's designed to improve balance, strength and coordination. Stopping by the same session were representatives of Clark-Cowlitz Fire Rescue, which has a partnership with Area Agency to provide complimentary safety services for seniors.

Clark-Cowlitz Fire Rescue offers home safety screenings and other miscellaneous physical assistance for frail people. If you're just getting back from the hospital and need a lift to get up your stairs or in your front door, for example, Clark-Cowlitz Fire Rescue may be able to meet you and provide that muscle power.

The service is available throughout Clark and Cowlitz counties, even though Clark-Cowlitz Fire Rescue's usual response area is north Clark County, Atkins said.

“It's a beautiful collaboration. They have an overriding interest in safety,” Atkins said. “We fund the program because of research about falls and risks of falls around the home.”

Fire-and-rescue responders enjoy far greater trust than many other public officials do these days, she added.



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Ten percent of all 911 calls to Clark-Cowlitz Fire Rescue are about older adults who fell down, said Mike Jackson, the department's division chief and prevention specialist. Avoiding your first fall means avoiding the potential "downhill slide" that's too common for older folks who fracture a hip, elbow or shoulder, he said. (Scan recent posts on the [Clark-Cowlitz Fire Rescue Facebook page](#) for a "10 days of fall prevention" primer.)

Don't call your local firehouse directly, Atkins said. Contact the Area Agency resource and referral center, where a resource specialist will listen to your needs and make the right referral. Call 360-694-8144, email at ClarkADRC@dshs.wa.gov or visit the website www.helpingelders.org.

Fitness, friendship

When The Columbian visited, some fitness program participants said they valued the social connection just as much as the preventive exercise. They've been known to hold the occasional post-session coffee klatch or even gather for a potluck at someone's house, they said.

The COVID-19 pandemic's interruption of all those positive activities — fitness and friendship — was devastating, participant Gail Grinder said.

Grinder, who lives in the countryside north of Battle Ground, said she started attending these group exercise classes years ago. When the pandemic struck, she and her husband felt the isolation acutely. They also experienced such marked deterioration of their strength and stamina, they began contemplating a move to a senior facility where more of their physical needs would be met.

But they never took that step, Grinder said with a smile. These days, she's focused on attending live fitness sessions to rebuild her strength and balance.

On Dec. 27, Grinder joined other seniors as they worked for an hour on slow, gentle stretches, marching strides, leg lifts and lunges. That's part of an established curriculum called [EnhanceFitness](#), which was developed and tested by the [University of Washington Health Promotion Research Center](#). It's currently offered by different instructors at different times on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings in Camas, Washougal and at the Bethel Lutheran Church in Brush Prairie.

Drop-ins are welcome, Atkins said, but all must sign in. Sessions are free but donations to the Area Agency on Aging are welcome. (The Area Agency on Aging isn't your only option for senior-specific exercise programs, Atkins added. Many senior health insurance plans offer free memberships at local health clubs where you can take similar classes or get fit on your own.)

SAIL toward stability

If you don't want to spend a whole hour working your body — or if you prefer to stay home and take it at your own pace — the following is a similar but simplified routine endorsed by the Washington State Department of Health. It's part of the state's [Stay Active and Independent for Life, or SAIL](#), program, which includes risk-reduction education as well as exercises that promote balance and strength.

These exercises presuppose that you have something safe and sturdy to hold onto at waist level, like a railing or grab bar.

1. March in place. Raise one knee up, no further than hip level. Then put it down and raise the other one. Repeat up to 10 times, alternating legs.

- Purpose: improve strength.

2. Heel-to-toe stand. Standing near the bar for support if needed, hold your arms out to the sides for balance. Put one foot in front of the other, either slightly (not quite touching) or directly (touching heel to toe). Stay in that position for 30 seconds. Work toward balancing without the bar.

- Purpose: Improve standing balance.

3. Wall push-ups. Stand facing the wall and extend your arms so hands are pressed against the wall. Keeping your back straight, lower your body to the wall. Push back to start position. Repeat eight to 10 times.

- Purpose: Strengthen arms, shoulder and back.

4. Toe stands. Stand tall with feet parallel while holding the bar. Keep holding the bar as you raise yourself up onto your toes, then lower again. Repeat eight to 10 times.

- Purpose: Strengthen leg muscles.

5. Stand on one leg. Stand tall beside the bar. Hold on if necessary. Raise one knee in front of you, no further than hip level. Hold for 10 seconds, then lower. Repeat on other side, adding repetitions as strength increases.



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