

FEAR OF FALLING IS A HEALTH RISK

by Noel Pittman, Director, Tai Chi Education and Research Institute

As I made my way to the department store exit I noticed a woman walking toward me - well dressed, thin, in her early 70's. One look at me she stopped dead in her tracks. From my work with older adults, as a teacher of Tai Chi Chuan, I understood that this frail woman feared I might accidentally bump into her and cause her to fall.

Because of her frailty, her fear of falling was completely justified. An injury producing fall could give her a one way ticket to an assisted living facility or even lead to her death. Falling, and its twin evil the fear of falling, are fast becoming the most important health issues affecting aging adults.

Former President Ronald Reagan's well publicized battle with Alzheimer's disease raised public awareness and sparked interest in finding a cure. Less attention was focused on Reagan's fall in his home on January 11, 2001, and the broken hip that resulted. Hip fractures are among the most serious injuries resulting from such falls and can lead to mortality due to blood clots, pneumonia, or infection.

The Centers for Disease Control report that 1 out of every 3 people age 65 and older have at least one serious fall each year! Alarmingly, 1 out of 4 seniors age 70 or older, who suffer a hip fracture, die within a year of the fall and 50 percent, of those who survive, never return to their prior level of mobility or independence."

According to a body of research published in gerontology journals, "Fear of falling is a big reason seniors adopt a sedentary lifestyle." Most older adults, on some level, recognize the danger of falling and do things that lead to a downward spiral of unhealthy outcomes:

- Retreating from activity leading to weaker muscles.
- Depression sets in due in part to a less active life style.
- Weight gain, due to depression and reduced physical activity resulting in further depression.
- A shuffling gate develops as seniors become fearful of taking a step.
- Heads down and bodies bent forward to watch every step.

Ironically these "precautions" don't reduce the risk of falls, but increase the likelihood that one will occur.

On the other hand, there is clear evidence that a variety of exercises will, in fact, reduce the risk of falling. Tai Chi Chuan, the slow moving exercise from China, has been demonstrated through research to be one of the best ways to both reduce fear of falling and the actual falls. The National Institute on the Aged reports Tai Chi to be *the most effective intervention*, reducing falls in seniors by 48 percent.



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Those who seriously practice Tai Chi improve posture and strengthen the muscles needed to stand and walk. Knowledge of body mechanics, derived from Tai Chi, allow them to walk with greater grace and confidence. Tai Chi is a low tech, low cost solution to one of the most significant health issues facing seniors today.

Noel Pittman, Jr. has studied and taught Tai Chi Chuan and Qi Gung for more than 30 years.

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