



47,000 Older Adults Treated in Emergency Departments Annually for Fall Injuries Related to Walkers and Canes

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Fractures most common injury; one in three injuries required hospitalization

From 2001 to 2006, an average of 129 Americans ages 65 and older were treated in emergency departments each day—a total of more than 47,000 each year—for injuries from falls that involved walkers and canes, according to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study published this month in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society.

The study, which examined six years of emergency department medical records, found that, for older adults that had falls related to walkers- or canes, most of the injuries involved walkers (87 percent). People were seven times more likely to be injured in a fall with a walker as with a cane. Older women sustained more than three out of four walker-related injuries (78 percent) and two out of three cane-related injuries (66 percent).

“Walking aids are very important in helping many older adults maintain their mobility. However, it's important to make sure people use these devices safely,” said Judy Stevens, Ph.D., the study's lead author. “Walkers are often used by frail and vulnerable older adults; people for whom falls, if they occur, can have very serious health consequences.”

Other key findings include:

- For men and women who used walkers or canes, the chances of sustaining a fall increased with age, with the highest injury rates among those ages 85 and older.
- Fractures were the most common type of fall injury associated with walkers (38 percent) and canes (40 percent) and about a third of all injuries were to the lower trunk, such as the hip or pelvis.
- More than half of fall injuries associated with walkers (60 percent) and canes (56 percent) occurred at home.
- One in three people whose fall involved a walker and more than one in four (28 percent) whose fall involved a cane had to be hospitalized.

The study points out the importance of preventing falls related to walking aids. Some prevention strategies include:

- Encouraging professionals to spend more time with clients (or patients) fitting walking aids, and;
- Educating people how to use walkers and canes safely, for example, by having physical therapists provide counseling at health fairs.

Additional studies are needed to better understand fall risk factors for older adults who use walkers and canes, as well as to identify potential design problems and improve the design of walkers.

Falls are the leading cause of nonfatal injury in the United States, and falls among older adults can have especially serious consequences. To help reduce the risk of falling, CDC's Injury Center recommends that adults ages 65 and older begin a regular exercise program, have their doctors review their medications, have their vision checked, and make their home surroundings safer.