

Healthy tips for older adults

Most of us are aware that our health risks increase as we age. But we can take steps to slow or reverse some of those risks. Here are a few tips for protecting ourselves from severe illness caused by respiratory viruses as well as tips to reduce our risk of falls as we age.

1) Preventing severe illness from respiratory viruses.

Respiratory viruses affect our lungs and airways. If we are 65 or older and if we develop chronic health conditions, we are more likely to experience serious illness, with more severe symptoms when we are infected by respiratory viruses, such as the influenza viruses or the virus that causes COVID-19.

That's why it's important for all of us, at any age, to know our individual risks and to take actions to protect ourselves in preparation for the upcoming flu season. We can also take steps for ongoing protection against the viruses that cause COVID-19 and any future variants of that virus.

Tip 1: Stay up to date on your vaccinations and boosters. This is important so you are protected against serious COVID-19 illness. In addition, with flu season around the corner, it's a good time to plan to get your flu (influenza) shot to protect against the seasonal flu.

For COVID, staying up to date means getting the primary vaccine series and the booster shots as soon as you are eligible. Boosters are important because our immunity wanes (decreases) over time and booster shots help "boost up" our immunity so we have a better, faster response if we are infected. The new bivalent COVID-19 booster vaccines are expected to provide even more protection against the current versions of the virus that are circulating in our communities – the omicron subvariants BA.4 and BA.5.

For flu, staying up to date means getting your annual flu shot. During the pandemic of the past 2 years, influenza seasons have been milder than usual – in part because people were taking more precautions to prevent COVID-19, which, like influenza, is a respiratory illness. In fact, flu has surged in Australia this year, where the southern hemisphere winter season is ahead of the United States by 6 months. The flu surge in Australia may mean we are also in for a worse flu season this year.

Tip 2: Especially if you have chronic health conditions, talk to your healthcare provider about additional ways to protect yourself from respiratory viruses when you are around others indoors.

Tip 3: Learn more about where you can get your flu shots or your COVID-19 shots and boosters by visiting southheartlandhealth.ne.gov.

2) Preventing falls.

Many falls do not cause injuries, but about 1 in every 4 falls in South Heartland residents age 45+ does cause an injury such as a broken bone or a head injury. There are many conditions, called risk factors, that can contribute to falling. We have more risk factors for falling as we age, but many of these risk factors can be changed or modified to help prevent falls. South Heartland supports two Falls Prevention programs. One is called Tai Chi Moving for Better Balance and the other is called Stepping On.

Tip 1: Learn about your own “falls risk” so you can make a change for the better. Staff at South Heartland can assess your falls risk. In fact, we measure participants’ falls risk at the beginning and end of each of our falls prevention courses. In the Stepping On classes that just wrapped up, one of the participants, a 65-year-old, came to the first class in a wheel chair and had a very high falls risk score. Six weeks later he showed up to class with only a cane and his falls risk score was nearly 60% less than when he started, which means his falls risk dropped dramatically in just 7 weeks.

Tip 2: Learn more about falls prevention. Stepping On is a 7-week program designed for people who are living at home and have experienced a fall or are concerned about falling. If you sign up for this free program, you will learn about your individual risk for falls and you will learn and practice strength and balance exercises. You will also learn how to identify and remove fall hazards in your home, the importance of proper footwear to reduce chances of falling, how your vision can impact your fall risk, how some medication side effects can lead to falls, and ways to reduce your risk of falls when you are away from home.

Tip 3: Sign up for a falls prevention program to reduce your risk of falling, keeping you independent, upright and active. The next Stepping On classes will start this fall. Tai Chi classes are starting across the health district in September. Contact Liz Chamberlain at South Heartland District Health Department to learn more or to sign up for a class: 402-462-6211 / 1-877-238-7595 or check out our website at southheartlandhealth.ne.gov.

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