

## **Avoiding the Risk of a Serious Fall**

January 16, 2014 (WHEATON, IL) – For older individuals who have experienced a serious fall, have felt unsteady on their feet, or have experienced moments of lightheadedness, the fear of falling is very real. In fact, individuals over the age of 65 have a 30% chance of falling each year and the percentage increases to 50% in individuals over the age of 80. Yet falling and instability should not be considered an inevitable part of the aging process.

“Falling and balance issues are very serious but in some cases can be prevented,” explains Marianjoy Physical Therapist, Anne Swanstrom-McCoy, who specializes in balance, falls and dizziness issues. “For example, a fall could be related to issues with an individual’s vision, which can be rectified with a new or different eyewear prescription or with the implementation of specific vision retraining. Dizziness can also be attributed to medication side effects or even to the number of medications that an individual is taking, which should be addressed by a physician. There are instances though where falling and balance issues can also be a sign of a more serious underlying disease or condition, which is why you should always speak with your healthcare provider about your concerns.”

Balance requires the coordination of vision, the inner ear, and sensations through the feet and legs. Your muscles must be strong and flexible, and work in a coordinated fashion to help stop your body from falling. As we age, muscle mass and strength in the hips and legs decreases, mobility in the ankles, knees and hips is reduced, and reflexes and reaction times are slower, leading to less ability to “catch” oneself when falling.

Experiencing a fall can also have mental and emotional implications. “Experiencing a fall can lead to fear of falling again,” notes Swanstrom-McCoy. “Individuals tend to restrict their activities, limit doing things they once enjoyed, and even avoid going out in public. It can lead to further decline of their physical abilities, as well as depression and social isolation.”

### **Steps to Fall Prevention**

If you are concerned about falling or have noticed that you aren’t steady on your feet, talk to your physician. Consider asking for a referral for a balance evaluation, such as those performed at the Marianjoy Balance and Vestibular Center. Each patient receives a thorough evaluation by a physical therapist. A treatment plan is then developed which may include learning how to change your body mechanics and stance, specific exercises to strengthen your muscles and core,

specific balance or vision retraining based on results of assessment, or the use of assistive equipment.

Since more than 75% of falls occur in the home during normal daily activities, home safety, proper clothing, and footwear should also be evaluated.

“Something as simple as installing a grab bar in the bathtub, removing throw rugs from the floor, or installing brighter lights in the stairway are all proactive ways to help avoid falls,” states Swanstrom-McCoy. “Avoid loose or open-backed slippers or sandals. Make sure the length of your pants or nightwear isn’t too long which can cause you to trip. However if you have fallen, even once, it is highly recommended that you consider an evaluation to help avoid the risk of falling again.”

For more information on Marianjoy’s Balance and Vestibular Clinic, please call 630-909-7150 or visit <http://bit.ly/1gW61I3>.

**Would you benefit from a balance and vestibular assessment?**

- Do you have a fear of falling?
- Have you fallen or do you feel unsteady on your feet?
- Do you often lose your balance, trip or stumble?
- Do you often place a hand on furniture to steady yourself as you walk through a room?
- Do you often feel dizzy when sitting up from a laying position or when standing up from a seated position?

If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, it’s time to speak to your doctor. You may also contact Marianjoy’s Balance and Vestibular Center at 630-909-7150 for more information on our programs and services.

**About Marianjoy Rehabilitation Hospital**

Marianjoy Rehabilitation Hospital is a nonprofit teaching hospital in Wheaton, Illinois, dedicated to the delivery of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation programs including stroke, neuromuscular, orthopedic, brain injury, spinal cord injury, and pediatrics. Marianjoy’s state-of-the-art, 128-private-room hospital is designed to provide rehabilitative care in a naturally holistic setting. Founded in 1972, Marianjoy Rehabilitation Hospital maintains an extensive network of inpatient, subacute, and outpatient sites, as well as physician clinics throughout the Chicago area. Marianjoy is a member of Wheaton Franciscan Healthcare. To learn more, visit [www.marianjoy.org](http://www.marianjoy.org).