What Puts You at Risk for Falls and How to Avoid the Danger

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Preventing Falls with Rheumatoid Arthritis

Falling is never pleasant, but a fall can be especially dangerous when you suffer from rheumatoid arthritis. A hospital stay, long recovery, social isolation and fear of future falls are all common consequences, and recent research suggests that just one fall can leave you at risk for more falls down the road. Learn what might be putting you at risk, and how to counteract that threat for a healthier, happier, and more mobile lifestyle.

Risk Factors that Can Lead to More Falls

The first step to prevention is knowledge. Get to know the primary causes of falls so you can take action:

- **Extreme fatigue.** Not surprisingly, the more tired you are, the more your depth perception can suffer, and the clumsier you become.
- **Psychotropic drugs.** Pharmaceuticals that alter chemical levels in the brain to treat anxiety, depression or insomnia may increase your risk of falling.
- **Swollen joints in the legs and feet.** Many falls with rheumatoid arthritis can be attributed to poor balance, problem with weight shifting, or trouble lifting the feet.
- **A history of falls.** Whether the causes are psychological, physical or both, if you've fallen before, you're more likely to fall again.

A recent UK study found that of all these risk factors, past falls are the biggest predictor of future falls: patients who experienced a fall over the last 12 months were three times more likely to fall within the next year. Those who had more than one fall in the previous year quadrupled their risk of having another fall. In light of these findings, RA patients should take extra care to protect themselves against risks and obstacles.

The Best Ways to Prevent Painful Falls

Fortunately, there are several ways you can reduce your risk of RA related falls, but you can do it alone. Consult your doctor for advice, and keep an eye out for helpful resources. Strengthen your body and mind to limit falls and raise your quality of life:

- **Talk to your doctor about reducing your psychotropic drugs.** Discuss alternative medications, and how to gradually withdraw from your current meds. Consider turning more attention to exercise and other therapies, but be sure to pass everything by your doctor before opting for any new treatment.
- **Stay active.** The stronger your muscles, the more stable you'll be. Regular aerobic exercise is great, but be sure to incorporate some resistance training every week to strengthen your legs and hips. Physiotherapy can help you target the important supportive muscle groups.
- **Make use of tools and aids.** If you find that morning stiffness leaves you unbalanced during your morning routine, make things easier on yourself: use a bar, rail or cane to help with your stability, or supportive gloves and braces whenever your joints and muscles feel particularly weak.

- **Overcome your fear of falling.** Whether you've fallen before or you're simply worried about what a fall could mean for you, fear of falling is not uncommon among RA sufferers. Unfortunately, that fear can keep many able people from participating in favorite activities or leading full lives, and in some cases, it can lead to more falls. Talk to a therapist if you think your fear is getting the better of you.

It's better to prepare for the worst and hope for the best than assume you're in the clear. Even if you take all the precautions, you could still experience a dangerous fall, so make sure you keep your doctor's number close by, so you can get the help you need if you do fall.