

Step Smart coalition safety fair seeks to educate seniors on avoiding falls

Liz Freeman, Naples Daily News 12 a.m. EDT June 16, 2016



(Photo: Erica Brechtelsbauer)

Marilyn Dooley-Girardo stepped off the machine that tests balance, a popular feature at a Step Smart Collier event at South Regional Library in East Naples.

'I'm normal,' the 71-year old said, pleased with the outcome of her risk assessment for falls. 'I'm normal for my age.'

Having relocated in January from Boston, Dooley-Girardi was among 200 people who attended a safety fair Thursday presented by Step Smart to educate seniors about the prevalence of falls and to provide tips to avoid them.

'This sort of thing is so informative,' she said.

Falls are the leading cause of injury and death among seniors and the death rate is 14 percent in Collier, higher than the statewide average of 9 percent, according to Step Smart, a coalition of local agencies that joined forces a few years ago to help address the issue.



Grace Mulqueen, 92, hugs tai chi instructor Liz Beacton-Read during the senior safety fair at South Regional Library in Naples on June 16, 2016. Mulqueen attends tai chi classes every Tuesday and Thursday at the wellness center downtown. The fair was hosted by Step Smart Collier, a fall prevention coalition that educates local seniors. (Erica Brechtelsbauer/Staff) (Photo: Erica Brechtelsbauer)

Sixty percent of falls occur in the home, 30 percent happen in places like restaurants and parking lots, and 10 percent occur in a health care institution, said Mark Tesoro, a board member with Step Smart and an analyst with the trauma center run by the Lee Memorial Health System in Fort Myers. He made a presentation Thursday.

'Home is a dangerous place,' he said.

Investing in some devices to stay safer in the home, like grab bars or guide lights, is a fraction of the expense compared to a fall and four-day hospital stay that runs \$43,000, Tesoro said.

In Collier last year, there were 238 deaths related to falls among seniors, compared to 111 auto accident deaths, he said. It's a misconception that falls are a normal part of aging, he said. They can be prevented by taking steps to improve balance with simple exercises, getting a risk assessment of the home and even by getting a vision check.

State Rep. Kathleen Passidomo, R-Naples, shared a story of how she fell down 12 steps at the Florida Capitol in Tallahassee nearly two years ago and was lucky enough to have avoided a head injury.

'Here's the thing, I don't know how I fell,' she said, adding that she is aware of the fear about falling. 'You are not alone.'

She makes it a point now to hold on to something even for one step down.

At Thursday's event, a dozen vendors had displays or educational material for seniors, in addition to the balance testing.

Matt Mendenhall, owner of The Happy Handyman and an aging-in-home specialist, said the bathroom is the first place to start to take measures to retrofit for improved safety.

'You need to be proactive,' he said.

Owen McGourty, 93, said his balance assessment results were pretty good.

He stays active in his Riviera Golf Estates home in East Naples.



NCH Rehab and Wellness Center employee Meaghan Baker talks with Joan Connell, left, and Joanne Mahoney, right, during the senior safety fair at South Regional Library in Naples on June 16, 2016. The fair was hosted by Step Smart Collier, a fall prevention coalition that educates local seniors. (Erica Brechtelsbauer/Staff) (Photo: Erica Brechtelsbauer)



Injury prevention educator Mark Tesoro, left, assists Tom Ward, right, during a balance screening

'I walk in the yard a lot,' he said.

at the senior safety fair at South Regional Library in Naples on June 16, 2016. The fair was hosted by Step Smart Collier, a fall prevention coalition that educates local seniors. (Erica Brechtelsbauer/Staff) (Photo: Erica Brechtelsbauer)

For more information about Step Smart Collier, visit the website at www.stepsmartcollier.org

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Tai chi instructor Liz Beacton-Read does demonstrations during the senior safety fair at South Regional Library in Naples on June 16, 2016. The fair was hosted by Step Smart Collier, a fall prevention coalition that educates local seniors. (Erica Brechtelsbauer/Staff) (Photo: Erica Brechtelsbauer)