

One foot in front of the...: Step Smart Collier hosts lecture to help seniors prevent falls

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Every three days, someone in Southwest Florida dies from a fall-related injury. That was one of many shocking facts senior citizens heard at last week's Step Smart Collier event on Marco Island.

Step Smart Collier is an organization that strives to educate senior citizens about both the dangers of falls and how they can be prevented. Keith Dameron, chairman of Step Smart Collier and vice president of Iberia Bank, said fall prevention isn't talked about much...but that it should be.

'This is literally a matter of life or death to seniors,' Dameron said. 'It's a serious issue, so we're doing our best to educate seniors and try to help them live longer and improve their quality of life.'

Mark Tesoro, Lee Memorial Hospital educator and analyst, was the night's keynote speaker, who said he tries to drive home two points during every lecture: falls are not a normal part of aging and they are preventable.

'Every fall has a reason that's either behavioral, environmental or physical,' Tesoro said, 'so find out why these things are occurring and how you can prevent them from occurring.'

One common reason why falls occur is because senior citizens lose their balance. At the event participants could take a free balance test to see if they're outside of the normal limits, in which case they should go see their physician, Tesoro said.

'Their physician can tell them what to do to improve their balance,' he said, 'and it's much easier to make those changes before a fall rather than after when the damage is already done.'

Representatives from Marco Island Fire Rescue were also at the event to provide seniors with more advice about fall prevention, and to urge them to call for a free home fall risk assessment.

'I'd rather see people before they fall rather than afterwards in the hospital,' Marco Island Fire Rescue member Grady Harrison said.

Harrison said Step Smart Collier is an important organization because falls can have more severe consequences

than most people think.

'Most people are in denial about aging,' he said, 'or they don't realize just how dangerous a fall can be. They think, 'Oh I'll just scrape a knee,' but falls can actually be deadly.'

Local author Don Farmer attended the event because he said he does understand the seriousness of falls.

'Falls can be a prolonged and ugly death sentence,' Farmer said, 'and I don't want that to happen to me or anyone else.'

The average fall death rate in Collier County is 14 percent, which is more than 50 percent higher than the state average, despite the fact that the county only has 5 percent more seniors.

'The statistics are just shocking,' Dameron said. 'This issue certainly isn't unique to Collier County, but it is much worse here.'

Michael Murphy, Marco Island Fire Rescue chief, said sometimes good intentions — such as wives trying to help their husbands who have fallen or neighbors attempting to pick each other up — can make the already bad problem even worse.

'Just call 911,' Murphy said. 'Ladies, don't listen to your husbands when they tell you not to call us because this is what we're trained to do and we're here to help.'

For more information about Step Smart Collier and fall prevention, visit its website at stepsmartcollier.org.



Karin Hargunani, 68, tests her balance at Step Smart Collier's event on June 9 at Iberia Bank. The event focused on teaching senior citizens about the importance of fall prevention. Lisa Conley/Staff