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June 11, 2007

Don't Slip! Stay Safe in Your Home

Whether we enjoy traveling or not, most of us agree that the best part of any trip is returning to our safe and comfortable home. Truly, "there's no place like home," but we may not be aware of hidden dangers where we live. This month, designated home safety month, focuses our attention on those dangers and what can be done to minimize risk of injury at home. While injuries on the roads and at work continue to decline, injuries in the home rose 30% since 1992, according to the National Safety Council. Further, over half of injury-related deaths and three-quarters of injuries resulting in disability occurred in and around the home.

This is an especially important consideration for people aged 65 and older, a group in which the death rate from unintentional injuries in the home is three times greater than for people under age 65. The majority of these injuries result from slips and falls, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In fact, the CDC reports that one third of older adults experience a fall every year. Among seniors, falls are the leading cause of death and the most common cause of nonfatal injuries and hospital admissions for trauma. In 2003, injuries related to falls among those 65 and older resulted in 13,700 deaths, 1.8 million people treated in emergency departments, and 460,000 hospital admissions. Direct medical costs related to falls in 2000 amounted to \$179 million for fatalities and another \$19 billion for nonfatal injuries.

The most common and costly fall injuries among seniors are injuries to the brain, hips, legs, and feet. In fact, 95% of all broken hips are caused by falls, leading to other health consequences. For example, the CDC reports that 20% of hip fractures result in death within one year, most necessitate a week-long hospital stay, and up to 25% of those with broken hips must remain in a long term care facility for at least a year.

The good news is that many falls can be prevented. The CDC recommends four measures one can implement to minimize risks from falls in the home. People of any age can benefit from these recommendations, but those who are 65 and older should pay particular attention to these suggestions:

- Exercise regularly**, paying special attention to activities that improve strength and balance. Lack of exercise leads to muscle weakness that can lead to falls.

- Have your **medications reviewed** by your doctor or pharmacist to determine if the drugs you use, either alone or in combination, can cause drowsiness or dizziness. Be sure to include prescription and over-the-counter

medications you take as well as nutritional vitamins and supplements when you meet with your health care provider.

-Have **annual eye examinations**. Conditions such as cataracts, macular degeneration, and glaucoma can limit vision and result in falls.

-**Reduce or eliminate fall hazards in your home**. Remove things you can trip over, like shoes, papers, books, and clothes, from stairways and areas where you walk. Remember to remove or secure rugs with double-sided tape to prevent slipping. Try to keep items you use regularly in cabinets where they can be reached easily without the need for a step stool. In the bathroom, install grab bars in the tub or shower and by the toilet, and use non-slip mats in the bathtub or shower. Be sure all staircases have secure hand railings and are well lit. In fact, it is a good idea to increase lighting throughout your home, as brighter lights are needed to see well as we age. And avoid going barefoot and try not to use slippers; it is safer to wear shoes both inside and outside of the home.

To learn more about fall prevention and home safety, contact the National Safety Council at 1-630-285-1121 (www.nsc.org), the National Association of Certified Home Inspectors (www.nachi.org), or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Injury Center at 1-800-232-4636 (www.cdc.gov/ncipc). The CDC also offers brochures and home safety checklists to the public. Additional information about this or other public health concerns is available at the Central Connecticut Health District at 860-721-2822 (www.ccthd.org).