

Massachusetts Department of Developmental Services Risk Management

Subject: FALLS

What is it?

Falls can happen for many reasons. It is not typical to fall. If someone is falling a lot (as often as once a week), the reason for the falls needs to be determined.

Some of the reasons that someone might fall are:

- **Seizures** – a fall can occur during the seizure or right after the seizure when a person is not yet fully recovered.
- **Body deformities** –curvature of the spine, one leg shorter than the other leg, club foot, tight heel cord, poorly healed fracture
- **Balance problems** due to medical conditions like cerebral palsy, tremors, or a stroke
- **Medications** –Many medications can affect a person’s balance. A change in dose can also affect his or her balance.
- A **change in vision**, new glasses, broken glasses, eye infection, ear infection, headache
- **Foot problems**–sore toes, new shoes, poorly fitting shoes or braces
- **Clothing** – loose baggy clothing, untied shoes, pants that are too long, soles of shoes that are too slippery or “catch” on carpet
- Uneven, wet or slippery **walking surfaces**, bad lighting, loud noises, walking too fast, or blocked pathways
- **Tiredness** or an illness causing the person to have a decrease in their energy level
- An **increase in energy** that causes a person to move too quickly or be distracted easily
- An **injury** that causes a person to change how they walk in order to protect the injury

What risk does it present?

Falls can cause minor or serious injuries, interfere with a person’s ability to engage in the activities they enjoy, limit independence and create fear of falling again.

How is it managed?

Anytime someone falls, whether they appear to be hurt or not, they need to be thoroughly examined for any possible injury. ***Do not move them until it has been determined that a serious injury has not occurred.***

Call 911 if the person:

- Is in a lot of pain while lying still or when they move
- Has an obvious deformity (bone sticking out, swelling or unusual position of arm or leg or head)
- Is unconscious
- Gray in color

The fall and all that you see after the fall needs to be written down and reported to other staff members. Often the injury will not be obvious right away (like bruising), but if the fall has been reported with details about how the person 'landed', bruises that show up later can be explained.

Look for:

- redness
- scrapes or abrasions like "rug burns"
- cuts or bleeding
- swelling
- any complaint of pain and where that pain is and when they complain. For example, "Joe complains of pain in his right knee when he kneels on it."

Once you have taken care of the person who has fallen and written the report of the incident you should also:

- Tell your supervisor or the nurse about the fall
- Fix whatever caused the fall (if you can)
- Write down and give to your supervisor and other staff a list of unsafe conditions that are still present (like a slippery sidewalk, or wet floor or broken equipment)
- Think about what would prevent more falls and talk about it with your supervisor and other staff

Where and to whom do these recommendations and protocols apply?

- This protocol applies to any individual supported by the Department of Developmental Services
- Information regarding the individual's status relative to this issue is to be handled in the same manner as any medical information according to HIPAA regulations.

Where can I find additional help?

- DPH – www.mass.gov/dph
- NIH – www.nih.gov
- DDS – Health and Wellness Promotion: www.mass.gov/dds