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FirstHealth Offers Help to Reduce Falls

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By Kirsten Ballard

Staff Writer

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At first you might not notice it - you have to start sitting to put on pants, keep tripping on that one rug, feel more comfortable holding onto furniture to navigate your house. Sound familiar? Maybe you think you've always been clumsy, or maybe you have a heightened risk for falling.

Last year, 4,774 people went to the hospital from the result of falls. FirstHealth's Gait and Balance training program looks to lower that number at the FirstHealth Centers for Rehabilitation. Pinehurst has a center on Aviemoore Drive, and there are other programs in Rockingham, Raeford, Pembroke and Troy.

Physical therapist Ginny Barbour urges people to become proactive about their balance. "You don't want to fall," said Barbour.

Terrence Peters, a retired surgeon and former client of the program, agrees. Peters has suffered falls before and subsequent injuries.

"I still look down every step," said Peters. "It's scary, it really is."

Balance begins to fade with age - the loss of strength is a large factor of loss of balance. "It's like a bicycle; the more you

practice the better you get," said Barbour.

When the clinic evaluates a client, it uses methods like the Berg Balance Assessment. The patient will complete a series of tasks like "stand with feet together," "close your eyes" and more. They receive a number score which, as Barbour explains, "is a gross



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assessment of balance."

The clinic then works through the program for a higher number score. The program lasts around 45 minutes per session for four to eight weeks.

"There is no cookie-cutter approach," said physical therapist Mary Veit. The program is individualized for each patient.

The program is tailored to the strength and mobility of each patient. Balance- and strength-building activities vary from pool workouts to standing on a pillow. These exercises are performed at the clinic under supervision.

"We don't want them falling down at home doing balance exercises," said therapist Jill Botnick.

A lot of patients don't realize how connected their balance is with other injuries. They want to fix the result instead of the cause. For example, Veit works with some patients on rotator cuff injuries stemming from hidden balance issues.

Insurance will cover the program if there is a medical necessity, and FirstHealth offers financial aid to qualified patients.

Prevention is less expensive than treatment. The therapists urge everyone to continually assess balance. It doesn't have to be a bad fall to be badly injured, Peters stresses. He knows how scary it is to get up in the middle of the night and try to navigate the dark house.

"Be your own advocate," said Botnick. Exercise improves balance.

For proactive prevention, the therapists recommend fall-proofing the house. A night light is the No. one tip for a safer house. They also recommend grab bars in the bathroom and using an assisted walking device if you have one.

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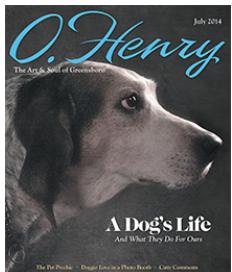
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