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Make this year free of falls

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Guest Opinion

During all of Dan Gable's athletic and coaching career at the University of Iowa, a fall (pinning an opponent on the wrestling mat), was the ultimate move. In fact, Gable is the all-time NCAA record holder in consecutive falls.

Gable's winning teams have generated a host of record-setting statistics, but one statistic that the wrestling coach probably never thought he'd contribute to is the large number of people who experience a fall-related injury every year. On Thanksgiving eve 2009, Gable fell and broke his leg.

The U.S. Center for Disease Control's Falls Injury Web page clearly conveys how prevalent this problem is, those at most risk, as well as the personal toll and financial costs it inflicts on our health care system (www.cdc.gov/homeandrecreationalafety/falls/index.html).

Consider some of these statistics:

- Fifty-five percent of falls take place inside the home.
- About one-third of the population over age 65 falls each year, and the risk increases proportionately with age. At 80 years, over half of seniors fall annually.
- Two-thirds of persons who experience a fall will fall again within six months.
- Falls are the leading cause of injury-related deaths among individuals who are over 65 years of age.
- In Johnson County, falls are the leading cause of injury hospitalization for persons 45-plus years.
- Falls account for 25 percent of all hospital admissions, and 40 percent of all nursing home admissions. Forty percent do not return to independent living.
- The average cost of hospitalization for a fall injury in 2000 was \$17,500 plus the physician costs.
- Ninety percent of falls that do not result in injury still have a detrimental effect on the person's health and well being. Thirty-five percent of older adults report that fear of another fall results in loss of confidence and self-imposed restriction of activities

For many individuals, a fall is the culmination and interaction of many factors. Contributing to falls may be any combination of poor balance, changes in gait, strength, vision, awareness, blood pressure and environmental hazards

What can you do to prevent falls? The CDC has four recommendations:

- Begin a regular exercise program.

- Have your health care provider review your medicines.
- Have your vision checked.
- And make your home safe.

The Johnson County Livable Community Initiative, in collaboration with many community groups, is launching a year-long public awareness campaign on fall prevention. The initiative will sponsor free, public presentations, displays and demonstrations associated with the featured topics. Events will be held at various community locations and offer seasonally relevant, practical and "user friendly" information.

Falls can be devastating; falls are costly; but, most importantly, falls are preventable.

Make a New Year's Resolution to take the first steps toward fall prevention and increase your chances of making 2010 a happy year.
