Costs of Falls Among Older Adults

In 2000, falls among older adults cost the U.S. health care system over $19 billion dollars or $28.2 billion in 2010 dollars. With the population aging, both the number of falls and the costs to treat fall injuries are likely to increase.

How big is the problem?

- One in three adults age 65 and older falls each year.
- Of those who fall, 20% to 30% suffer moderate to severe injuries that make it hard for them to get around or live independently, and increase their risk of early death.
- Older adults are hospitalized for fall-related injuries five times more often than they are for injuries from other causes.
- In 2009, emergency departments treated 2.2 million nonfatal fall injuries among older adults; more than 582,000 of these patients had to be hospitalized.

How are costs calculated?

The costs of fall-related injuries are often shown in terms of direct costs.

- Direct costs are what patients and insurance companies pay for treating fall-related injuries. These costs include fees for hospital and nursing home care, doctors and other professional services, rehabilitation, community-based services, use of medical equipment, prescription drugs, changes made to the home, and insurance processing.
- Direct costs do not account for the long-term effects of these injuries such as disability, dependence on others, lost time from work and household duties, and reduced quality of life.

How costly are fall-related injuries among older adults?

- In 2000, the total direct medical costs of all fall injuries for people 65 and older exceeded $19 billion: $0.2 billion for fatal falls, and $19 billion for nonfatal falls.
- By 2020, the annual direct and indirect cost of fall injuries is expected to reach $54.9 billion (in 2007 dollars).
- Among community-dwelling older adults, fall-related injury is one of the 20 most expensive medical conditions.
- In 2002, about 22% of community-dwelling seniors reported falling in the previous year. Medicare costs per fall averaged between $9,113 and $13,507.
- Among community-dwelling seniors treated for fall injuries, 65% of direct medical costs were for inpatient hospitalizations; 10% each for medical office visits and home health care, 8% for hospital outpatient visits, 7% for emergency room visits, and 1% each for prescription drugs and dental visits. About 78% of these costs were reimbursed by Medicare.
- In a study of people age 72 and older, the average health care cost of a fall injury totaled $19,440, which included hospital, nursing home, emergency room, and home health care, but not doctors’ services.
How do these costs break down?

Age and sex

- The costs of fall injuries increase rapidly with age.
- In 2000, the costs of both fatal and nonfatal falls were higher for women than for men.
- In 2000, medical costs for women, who comprised 58% of older adults, were two to three times higher than the costs for men.

Type of injury and treatment setting

- In 2000, the direct medical cost of fatal fall injuries totaled $179 million. About 78% of fall deaths, and 79% of total costs, were due to traumatic brain injuries (TBI) and injuries to the lower extremities.
- Injuries to internal organs were responsible for 28% of fall deaths and accounted for 29% of costs.
- Fractures were both the most common and most costly nonfatal injuries. Just over one-third of nonfatal injuries were fractures, but these accounted for 61% of total nonfatal costs—or $12 billion.
- Hospitalizations accounted for nearly two-thirds of the costs of nonfatal fall injuries and emergency department treatment accounted for 20%.
- On average, the hospitalization cost for a fall injury is $17,500.
- Hip fractures are the most frequent type of fall-related fracture. The average hospitalization cost was $18,000; this was 44% of the direct medical costs for hip fractures.