

Preventing Injuries in Young and Old

Injuries are a leading cause of disability in the US, and a leading cause of death among young people. Most injuries result from accidents, although many are the result of physical violence. Among the elderly, injuries are often the result of functional impairments. Many injuries, both intentional and unintentional, occurring in children or the elderly, are preventable. In some instances, prevention will require a committed, societal effort. In other instances, just a little common sense.

Among young children, injuries associated with motor vehicle accidents are a leading cause of injury and even death. There has been a lot of attention focused recently on injuries related to air bags. Many more children are injured in cars, however, as a result of not being properly restrained. Infants should of course be secured in a properly installed care seat whenever riding in a car. Children up to age 8 or 60 lbs. should be seated in a booster seat so that they are securely held by the shoulder harness. Children up to age 15 should generally sit in the back seat, away from the air bag, and should use a seat belt. While the law may not require seat belt use in the back, the laws of common sense do. The evidence that seat belts prevent serious injury and death is clear and emphatic.

Injuries related to gun use are unfortunately not

uncommon among children. From a preventive medicine perspective, the best advice is not to have a gun in the house. The next best thing, if you do have a gun and children, is to keep the gun unloaded and locked out of reach. Before you let your kids spend a lot of time playing at a neighbor's or friend's, you would be quite appropriate to make sure they took similar precautions.

Many injuries related to sports and hobbies are predictable and preventable. Head injuries are common in motorcycle accidents; helmets may not be mandatory in Connecticut, but they sure make good sense. The same can be said of protective gear while doing any other high speed sport with potential for high impact injuries; biking, skiing, and roller-blading all come to mind.

Most injuries in the elderly are related to falls. Falls can be avoided if the home is inspected by a health professional knowledgeable about hazards that contribute to falls. Regular exercise and in particular lots of walking throughout life can help maintain a level of fitness that makes falling less likely. It's never too late to start exercising regularly, and never too late to benefit. If a fall occurs, it's much less likely to produce serious injury if bones are strong. Bone strength can be maintained by regular exercise, by a diet rich in calcium or use of calcium supplements, by



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regular exposure to natural outdoor light, and in women, by use of hormone replacement. For the most part, these practices offer a range of benefits.

While there have been many attempts to identify the best ways to prevent violence in society, the answer is not yet available. I suspect we can reduce violence by being considerate, by remembering we are all more alike than different, and helping others to view the world that way. The more we can cultivate the view that we're all in "this" together, the less likely we may be to turn on one another when the going gets tough.

Research is clearly needed to enhance common sense, and the Yale-Griffin Research Center has sought funds for a youth violence prevention study.

But we already know enough to prevent the majority of injuries, if we act on what we know.

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Preventive Medicine Column

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