

Having poor vision can raise risk for falls among older adults

New York, NY (November 19, 2018) - Vision [impairment](#) and [blindness](#) affect one in 11 Americans age 65 and older. Because our population is aging, the number of older adults with vision [problems](#) is predicted to rise. Older adults who have impaired [vision](#) may be at risk for decreased independence, poorer well-being, and an increased [risk of falls](#). For example, in any given year, approximately 30 percent of adults over age 65 will fall. Having impaired vision more than doubles this risk.

For older adults, falls are a major cause of illness and death. Even having a fear of falling is a challenge that can limit activity and worsen quality of life and independence as you age.

However, we don't have much information on how often visually impaired older adults experience a fall, and we have even less information about what happens to them after a fall. A team of researchers suggested that we need this information in order to understand the scope of the problem and create ways to prevent falls in visually impaired older adults.

To learn more, the research team examined information from the National Health and Aging Trends Study (NHATS). They published their study in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society.

Their goal was to provide up-to-date information on the frequency of falls. The team also wanted to learn more about the fear of falling and how it might limit activity among older adults who have vision impairments.

Participants in the study were considered visually impaired if they had trouble recognizing someone across the street and/or reading newspaper print, even when using corrective lenses.

Falls were defined as "any fall, slip, or trip" that involved losing balance and landing on the floor or ground or at a lower level. Participants were asked if they had any fall in the past month and if they fell more than once in the past 12 months. Fear of falling was determined by asking participants if they had worried about falling down in the last month. An additional question asked whether worrying about falling ever caused participants to limit their activities.

The researchers also asked about the number of chronic conditions the participants had, including [heart attack](#), heart disease, [high blood](#)

[pressure](#), [arthritis](#), [osteoporosis](#), [diabetes](#), lung disease, [stroke](#), and [cancer](#).

The researchers concluded that falls, fear of falling, and limiting activity were considerably more common among older adults who were visually impaired.

About 50 percent of people who said they had trouble seeing were afraid of falling and as a result, limited their activity. More than one in four older adults with vision problems had recurrent falls in the year before they were surveyed.

The researchers said their study suggested that taking steps to prevent falls for older adults with vision problems was important and could limit the harmful consequences of falls for older adults. What's more, helping older adults prevent falls might also slow declines in well-being, quality of life, and independence associated with a fear of falling.

The researchers noted that vision impairment can be treated or even avoided in many cases, and they speculated that doing so might be a strategy to decrease falls and fall-related problems for some older adults with vision problems.

"We need more information about falls and the fear of falling in older adults with vision problems. This will help us design public health and clinical interventions to address some of the key consequences of vision loss for older adults," said study co-author Joshua R. Ehrlich, MD, MPH.

This summary is from "[Prevalence of Falls and Fall-Related Outcomes in Older Adults with Self-Reported Vision Impairment](#)." It appears online ahead of print in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*. The study authors are Joshua R. Ehrlich, MD, MPH; Shirin E. Hassan, BAppSc (Optom), PhD; and Brian C. Stagg, MD, MS.

About the Health in Aging Foundation

This research summary was developed as a public education tool by the Health in Aging Foundation. The Foundation is a national non-profit established in 1999 by the American Geriatrics Society to bring the knowledge and expertise of geriatrics healthcare professionals to the

public. We are committed to ensuring that people are empowered to advocate for high-quality care by providing them with trustworthy information and reliable resources. Last year, we reached nearly 1 million people with our resources through HealthinAging.org. We also help nurture current and future geriatrics leaders by supporting opportunities to attend educational events and increase exposure to principles of excellence on caring for older adults.

- For more information or to support the Foundation's work, visit <http://www.HealthinAgingFoundation.org>

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Included in more than 9,000 library collections around the world, the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* (JAGS) highlights emerging insights on principles of aging, approaches to older patients, geriatric syndromes, geriatric psychiatry, and geriatric diseases and disorders. First published in 1953, JAGS is now one of the oldest and most impactful publications on gerontology and geriatrics, according to ISI Journal Citation Reports®. Visit wileyonlinelibrary.com/journal/JGS for more details.

About the American Geriatrics Society

Founded in 1942, the American Geriatrics Society (AGS) is a nationwide, not-for-profit society of geriatrics healthcare professionals that has--for 75 years--worked to improve the health, independence, and quality of life of older people. Its nearly 6,000 members include geriatricians, geriatric nurses, social workers, family practitioners, physician assistants, pharmacists, and internists. The Society provides leadership to healthcare professionals, policymakers, and the public by implementing and advocating for programs in patient care, research, professional and public education, and public policy.

- For more information, visit AmericanGeriatrics.org.

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