

Educating Seniors: Bring Your Health... Home

A Monthly Column by Kimberly Harmon RN, BSN

The Best Home Health Care Doesn't Fall Down; Neither Should You!

Last month you were introduced to two very special home health care providers, Lydia Oquendo and Patti Furmanick. After reading the column, several people asked me how I find and hire these unique individuals.

Well, normally I don't give out "trade secrets" but this time I'll make an exception. Because if you're in a situation where you may eventually need home health care for yourself or someone you love, you need to understand the philosophy behind what I call the "essence of home health care."

That philosophy starts with the questions I ask during interviews. Of every applicant, I always ask: "What do you do to make a client feel special in their own home?" You should do the same. It's a simple question that reveals a lot about the kind of care and attentiveness you'll get from that provider.

If you're considering home health care, you need to think about what a home care provider can do for you—because every case is different. Great caregivers (like Lydia and Patti) understand that and act accordingly.

You see, when I hire care providers, I look for people who share our philosophy, which is to celebrate life. I also look for compassionate people. These attributes guide us through the day: I want to make sure the care providers I hire care enough about people to give their all and expect nothing in return. After all, they're giving people a part of themselves. To me, that's one of the fundamentals of providing superlative care.

Another fundamental of providing superlative care is staying current with the trends and developments in home health care. Every six weeks or so I attend professional development seminars.

In November I attended a seminar on preventing falls. Some of you may recall that I addressed this issue in a previous column, but with snow and ice on the ground most of the points you read then bear repeating.

As many of you know from personal experience, falling can hurt—both physically and financially. Understandably, preventing falls is a growing priority for home care providers. Our interest in this area has intensified as researchers have identified the factors that place someone at the risk of falls. We understand that our home care patients—by their age, infirmities and related factors—are at risk of high falls, and we're working to reduce that risk.

What can you do on your own to lower your risk of falling?

The good news—as I learned and you'll discover below—is that you can take a few simple steps to lower your risk of falling:

- **Exercise.** If you're not already exercising, start. A regular exercise program is one of the most important ways to reduce your chances of falling. It makes you stronger and helps you feel better. Exercises that improve balance and coordination are the most helpful. Conversely, lack of exercise leads to weakness and increases your chances of falling. Note: Before you start any exercise program, ask your doctor or health care worker about the best type of exercise for you.
- **Check your vision.** Get your eyes checked by an eye doctor. You may be wearing the wrong glasses or have a condition such as glaucoma or cataracts that limits your vision. Poor vision can increase your chances of falling.
- **Have your health care provider review your medicines.** Have your doctor or pharmacist review the medicines you're taking (including ones that don't need prescriptions such as cold medicines). As we age, the way some medicines affect our bodies can change. Some medicines, or combinations of medicines, can make you drowsy or light-headed which can lead to a fall.
- **Finally, make your home safer.** Statistics show that half of all falls happen at home. Make your home safer by:
 - Removing things you can trip over (papers, books, clothes, and shoes) from stairs and places where you walk.
 - Removing small throw rugs or using double-sided tape to keep the rugs from slipping.
 - Keeping items you use often in cabinets you can reach easily without using a step stool.
 - Installing "grab bars" next to your toilet and in the tub or shower.
 - Using non-slip mats in your bathtub and on shower floors.
 - Improving the lighting in your home. As you get older, you need brighter lights to see well. Lamp shades or frosted bulbs can reduce glare.
 - Installing handrails and lights in on all staircases.
 - Wearing shoes that give good support and have thin non-slip soles. Avoid wearing slippers and athletic shoes with deep treads.

May you and yours have a safe and healthy 2008!

Remember, the essence of home health care is to provide individuals, families and loved ones with services that promote maximum comfort and independence in the home.

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