



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

DAVID Y. IGE
GOVERNOR

ELIZABETH A. CHAR, M.D.
DIRECTOR

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

September 18, 2020

20-074

Department of Health encourages fall prevention and ocean safety during National Spinal Cord Injury Awareness Month in September

HONOLULU – Preventing the spread of COVID-19 to avoid hospital admissions and ensuring there are sufficient number of beds to care for those affected by the pandemic has been an important priority. The Hawai'i Department of Health is encouraging everyone, especially vulnerable seniors, to take other precautions to stay healthy and avoid overwhelming the healthcare system.

In Hawai'i, about 160 people require medical treatment for a spinal cord injury (SCI) each year. Unintentional falls are the leading cause of SCIs in the state. Almost half of all falls occur with seniors age 65 and older.

An SCI is caused by a sudden, traumatic blow to the spine that fractures, dislocates, crushes or compresses one or more vertebrae and can result in temporary or permanent paralysis.

“Understanding how to prevent falls and other injuries can significantly improve the quality of life for Hawai'i's adults and seniors,” said Mary Brogan, administrator, Hawai'i Department of Health, Developmental Disabilities Division. “We encourage everyone to take precautions for self-care and safety to help prevent disability from SCIs.”

To avoid SCI due to falls:

- Have your medications reviewed by your healthcare provider to be aware of potential side effects such as dizziness;
- Schedule an eye exam and have your vision checked every year;
- Reduce the likelihood of falls in your home by using this [checklist for a safer home](#); and
- Stay active and exercise to improve your balance and strength.
 - Tai chi is an exercise that improves balance, even if it is done while seated. Try these [warmups](#) and [exercises](#).

Ocean activities, including swimming, surfing, bodyboarding and bodysurfing, are the second leading cause of SCI in Hawai'i. "Take a few minutes to be aware of your surroundings, the weather, and other potential hazards," said Tammie Smith, the health department's ocean safety-drowning prevention program coordinator.

Follow these tips when engaging in ocean activities:

1. Make sure to visit [beaches with lifeguards](#) present, check with them before going into the ocean, and make sure to swim within their sight.
2. Observe all posted [beach warning signs](#).
3. Remain aware of the ocean's activity; do not stand with your back to the waves.
4. Do not dive or jump off cliffs or sea groins. Enter the water feet first and duck under oncoming waves.
5. The United States Lifesaving Association suggests riding the shoulder of a wave; if you "wipeout," land as flat as possible with your hands out in front of you.
6. Know your limits – when in doubt, stay out of the water.

To keep your spine healthy and maintain your everyday health:

1. Exercise regularly and eat balanced meals to maintain a healthy weight.
2. Improve body posture to reduce strain on spinal discs.
3. Use proper form when lifting heavy objects.
4. Quit smoking, which weakens bones and damages spinal tissue.
5. Exercise your abdominal muscles to help keep your spine stable.
6. Get a good night's sleep – use a mattress and pillow that provide adequate support; try sleeping with a pillow beneath or between your legs to help align your spine.
7. Take frequent breaks from sitting and stretch.
8. Manage stress to reduce spine spasms.

If you or someone you know has sustained an SCI, call 9-1-1 immediately and advise the person to hold still and to not move their head and neck.

For more information on preventing SCIs and promoting spine health, call the Neurotrauma Helpline at (808) 733-2155 or find all the activities on the Neurotrauma Supports website at health.hawaii.gov/nt/spinal-cord-injury-awareness-month.

###