

# N.M. ranks first in deaths from accidental falls for seniors

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. ♦ A gloomy statistic for New Mexico's seniors: the state ranks first in the nation in deaths from accidental falls among people over the age of 65.

The **National Safety Council** released data on the number of fatal falls involving seniors in each state during a congressional briefing Wednesday in Washington, D.C.

New Mexico ranked highest with 99.26 deaths per 100,000 people over the age of 65, according to the Illinois-based council. The council based its findings on 2005 statistics by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control.

Wisconsin was second at 87.35 deaths per 100,000 people over age 65 and Vermont came in third with 81.46. Alaska ranked the lowest, with 15.95 deaths.

Bill O'Connell, executive director of government affairs for the NSC, said falls among people 65 and older is now the leading cause of injury deaths. He also noted that the mortality rate of falls by older people has increased by 39 percent between 1999 and 2005.

O'Connell said the preponderance for falls among older people can increase with more medication, less exercise, loss of muscle strength, growing obesity rates and vision issues.

"It's like a person standing in a river that has a current. In a current, they don't realize they're going downstream," O'Connell said. "They don't realize they are losing control over their bodies. These factors are all things that can cause you to become destabilized."

New Mexico also leads the nation in falling deaths for all ages, which has been linked to poverty and substance abuse, including alcohol.

Dr. Mike Landen, deputy state epidemiologist, said among the 65 and older group, he's not sure of the underlying cause but said poverty could be a contributing factor.

"We need to do more work in that area, exploring why the rates of fall-related deaths are increasing in New Mexico. We need to understand the problem better and come up with creative interventions," Landen said.

The New Mexico Healthy Aging Collaborative, targeted at improving senior citizens' quality of life, is working on fall prevention approaches including developing exercise programs for the elderly to improve their balance, mobility and strength, and modifying homes to reduce hazards such as poor lighting and loose rugs.

Experts said falls among the elderly have also hit the health care system in the pocketbook.

Medical treatment costs for falls involving people over age 65 were more than \$19 billion in 2000, and that figure is projected to increase to more than \$40 billion by 2020, O'Connell said.

More involvement from health care practitioners can help provide a solution, he said.

"When older patients are receiving a physical or checkup, we need physicians and nurses to ... ask their patients 'Have you fallen recently?' or ask them about the medications they're taking," he said.

Landen said the numbers serve as a wake up call for families to be aware of fall risks and make the necessary changes to protect quality of life.

O'Connell said the council could not determine if the rural character of a state contributed to fall death rates for seniors. In the state-by-state breakdown, five primarily rural states -- Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Alabama and Alaska -- were listed among states with the lowest death rates.

"We can do something about this. Yes, this problem is widespread and growing, it's expensive -- and it's also preventable," he said. "It is not inevitable that if people are over 65 they are going to fall."