

Exercise and tai chi routines help elderly to 'bounce back' after a fall

BY KEITH ROSSITER

"You've slumped back into your chair, Pearl," the physiotherapist warns.

Pearl, 97, mutters under her breath, but sits upright again and resumes her seated tai chi exercises.

Pauline Virgo, a specialist physio, is on a mission to help older people to avoid the falls and pitfalls of ageing.

One of her class at the Three Corners Care Home in Galmp-ton, near Brixham, Brenda Rideough, 71, understands the dangers only too well.

Brenda recently fell while cleaning her freezer, and spent a terrifying three days lying on the floor of her Paignton home before help arrived.

She is in the care home temporarily for rehabilitation, which includes exercises to help her get up off the floor.

"Falls are a big problem for the elderly," Michelle O'sullivan, the care home manager, says. "People with dementia in particular forget what their abilities are, or just get more frail."

"Sometimes a fall is a one-off and they're soon back on their feet. But for some people it's just the start, and leads to more and more falls."

"We did an audit last month, and the number of falls here has dropped dramatically in the two years that Pauline and her associates have been coming."

Mrs Virgo, founder and lead physiotherapist of Zest Physiotherapy for Life, says: "The key is to reduce sedentary behaviour. We know that people over 65 spend eight to 10 hours sitting. And for care home residents it's more."

"We try to reduce sedentary behaviour by introducing exercise into their care plan."

The NHS offers help for people who have had falls, but Mrs Virgo and her associates can offer more time and regular visits, building up a long-



Pauline Virgo takes Pearl Paget, Mike Green and Brenda Rideough through their morning exercises at Three Corners care home

PHOTOS: AMY ST

term relationship." She and her associates carry out assessments and put residents through their paces with a variety of exercises.

They leave staff with an ex-

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ercise plan for each resident.

"When I first asked Pearl if she would like to do some exercises, she said, 'Absolutely not. I've never done exercise and I'm not going to start

now'," Mrs Virgo says. "But it was just the word. She watched for a few weeks, and then joined in."

"When I told her we were doing tai chi, she said, 'High tea?'"

Zest Physiotherapy for Life works with care homes around Devon, but also helps individuals in their own homes. "We meet a lot of very old people, and the ones who make it to 100 or 105 are the ones who have always kept fit," she says.

"We are trying to get the message out that if people do some strengthening, flexibility and balance work it will contribute to a reduction in falls later in life."

