

Preventing Falls in Older Adults

Every year, thousands of older adults fall and hurt themselves. Falls are one of the main causes of injury and loss of independence in people ages 65 and older.

There are many reasons older people fall. They may lose their footing when stepping off a street curb, or they may get dizzy from taking medicines. Some falls may be related to the effects of aging, such as muscle weakness or delayed reflexes, or some falls may be related to the results of a stroke.

Experts agree that some falls in older adults can be prevented. But since each person's risks are a bit different, talk to your doctor about what might be most helpful for you.

Taking Care of Yourself

- Exercise regularly to improve your strength, muscle tone, and balance. Walk if you can. Swimming may be a good choice if you cannot walk easily.
- Have your vision and hearing checked each year or any time you notice a change. If you have trouble seeing and hearing, you might not be able to avoid objects and could lose your balance.
- Know the side effects of the medicines you take. Ask your doctor or pharmacist whether the medicines you take can affect your balance. Sleeping pills or sedatives can affect your balance.
- Limit the amount of alcohol you drink. Alcohol can impair your balance and other senses.
- Ask your doctor whether calluses or corns on your feet need to be removed. If you wear loose-fitting shoes because of calluses or corns, you can lose your balance and fall.
- Talk to your doctor if you have numbness in your feet.
- You may get dizzy if you do not drink enough water. To prevent dehydration, drink plenty of fluids. Choose water and other clear liquids. If you have kidney, heart, or liver disease and have to limit fluids, talk with your doctor before you increase the amount of fluids you drink.

Preventing Falls at Home

- Remove raised doorway thresholds, throw rugs, and clutter. Repair loose carpet or raised areas in the floor.
- Move furniture and electrical cords to keep them out of walking paths.
- Use nonskid floor wax, and wipe up spills right away, especially on ceramic tile floors.
- If you use a walker or cane, put rubber tips on it. If you use crutches, clean the bottoms of them regularly with an abrasive pad, such as steel wool.
- Keep your house well lit, especially stairways, porches, and outside walkways. Use night-lights in areas such as hallways and bathrooms. Add extra light switches or use remote switches (such as switches that go on or off when you clap your hands) to make it easier to turn lights on if you have to get up during the night.

Continued on next page

Preventing Falls at Home *continued*

- Install sturdy handrails on stairways.
- Move items in your cabinets so that frequently used objects are on the lower shelves (about waist level).
- Keep a cordless phone and a flashlight with new batteries by your bed. If possible, put a phone in each of the main rooms of your house, or carry a cell phone in case you fall and cannot reach the phone. You can also wear a device around your neck or wrist that sends a signal for help when you push a button.
- Wear low-heeled shoes that fit well and give your feet good support. Use footwear with nonskid soles. Check the heels and soles of your shoes for wear. Repair or replace worn heels or soles.
- Do not wear socks without shoes on smooth floors, such as wood.
- Walk on the grass when the sidewalks are slippery. If you live in an area that gets snow and ice in the winter, sprinkle salt on slippery steps and sidewalks, or ask a family member or friend to do this for you.

Preparing for Falls

- Practice getting up from a fall. You can start by gently lowering yourself to the floor. If you're unsteady, have someone with you when you practice. If you're able to get up without help, practice this once a week or until you feel comfortable.
- If you can't get up by yourself, see a physical therapist for help. A physical therapist can work with you to prevent falls and make a plan for what you can do in the event of a fall.
- Take extra care if you live alone.
- If you live alone, think about wearing an alert device that will bring help in case you fall and can't get up. You can also carry a cordless or cell phone with you from room to room, which you can use to quickly call for help if you need it.
- Set up a plan to make contact once a day with a family member or friend. Make sure there is at least one person who knows where you are.

Preventing Outdoor Falls

- When you go outdoors, keep your hands free by using a cross-body shoulder bag, a fanny pack, or a backpack. Make sure your bag or pack is balanced and not too heavy. Keep your hands out of your pockets for better balance.
- Keep porches and outside walkways well lit.
- Watch your step.
- If you wear bifocal or progressive lenses, you may have problems as you step off curbs or climb stairs. Consider getting glasses with a single prescription that you can wear when you walk.
- Use delivery services.
- Search for nearby drugstores and grocery stores that can take orders over the phone and make deliveries to your home. Use these services, especially when the weather is bad.
- Keep stairs and walking paths safe.
- If you live in an area that gets snow and ice in the winter, have a family member or friend sprinkle salt or sand on slippery steps and sidewalks.
- Have a phone or medical alert device with you when outdoors so you can quickly call for help if you need it.

