

Frequently Asked Questions About Falls

Why does age increase your risk for falls and what can you do about it?

Although anyone can fall, as you age, falls become more common and more serious. The good news is that you do not need to let the fear of falling rule your life. With some medical management, physical activity, and common sense you can help yourself avoid falls and stay independent longer.

Normal aging and risk for falls

You are more likely to fall as you age because of normal age-related physical changes and medical conditions - and the drugs that you take for those medical conditions. As you age, time takes its toll on your body and you may find yourself taking more medications or experiencing some limitations in your mobility. While the changes are unique to you, many aging changes are common and put you at higher risk.

- **Poor eyesight.** You may not see as well which affects your coordination and balance.
- **Reduced reaction time.** The nerves that carry information from your brain to your muscles can deteriorate slowing your reaction time and your ability to move away from obstacles quickly enough. (i.e. avoiding an ice patch on the pavement.)
- **Decline in muscle strength.** Normal decline in your muscle strength and joint flexibility can change how easily you stand up, walk, or get out of chairs.
- **Limited movement.** If you do not regularly exercise, changes occurring with the aging process can be worse.

What can you do to help prevent falling?

Everyone gets older but there are some things you can do to help reduce the risk of falling. Just by following these tips, you can increase your chances for avoiding falls and remaining independent:

- **Keep moving.** Regular exercise helps to strengthen muscles and bones and boost circulation which in turn, will give you confidence to stay independent. Postural Stability Instruction classes (PSI) consist of gentle exercises that increase stamina and improve balance. Ask your GP for a referral to a Staying Steady class.

- Exercises your health professional recommends can improve balance, strength, coordination and flexibility. They may also have referred the physical therapist to your home to give you an individual exercise program to improve your balance, muscle strength and gait (how you take steps).
- Take regular daily exercise to improve your muscle strength, flexibility and balance. All forms of physical activity including gardening, walking and dancing can help.
- **Medication.** Be aware of feelings of dizziness when getting up and after taking medication – talk to your doctor or pharmacist if you are concerned. Patients on FOUR or more medicines are at greater risk of having a fall. Regular medication reviews play an important part in falls prevention.
- **Use medical equipment when appropriate.** Your doctor or therapist may also recommend a cane or walker to ensure that you are balanced when you are moving. The secret to reducing your risk for falls is moving more and moving safely. You are not helping yourself by moving less.
- **Make your home safer.** Check your house for hazards. You may need to make some compromises to make it safer but it's worth it. Keep everyday items in easy reach and keep

your floors clear from objects. If you are unable to bend to pick things up, use a stick to move them aside.

- **Stay in touch.** If you live alone, ask someone to check on you once daily, or consider paying for an emergency monitoring device. Get in touch with voluntary organisations for additional support.
- **Footwear.** Wear the right supportive footwear with non-slip soles and they are in good condition.
- **Nutrition.** Regular healthy meals help keep up strength and balance. Eat meals with lots of vegetables and fruit and include foods that are rich in Vitamin D and Calcium. It is important to drink plenty of fluids and don't skip meals as it can cause weakness and dizziness.
- Take care if you are drinking alcohol, especially if you are taking medication – check with your pharmacist.

How can I reduce my risk of falling?

Falls threaten the health, well-being and independence of older people. Here's how to reduce your risk of falling.

General Safety

- When moving from lying down to standing, sit up first and stay sitting a moment or two. Then stand up slowly and stand a few seconds before trying to walk.
- When you first wake up, sit on the edge of the bed and make sure you are not dizzy before you get out of bed.
- Use a cane or walker if you are unsteady. Promptly replace worn rubber tips of these devices.
- Be careful around pets. They can get in front of your feet or jump on you.
- Eat breakfast every morning. Skipping a meal could make you dizzy.
- Wear clothes that fit properly. You can trip on a coat, trousers or skirt or bathrobe that is too long.
- Keep floors clear of clothing and newspapers/books – clean up spills straight away.
- Close cabinet drawers so you won't stumble over them. If you are not close to the telephone when it rings, don't rush to it. Fast, sudden moves could throw you off balance.
- Make sure you have access to a telephone that you can reach to call for help if you fall. Consider carrying a portable phone.
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Bath/Bedroom

- Never grab a towel rack, shampoo holder or soap tray for support in the shower. These will not hold a person's weight.
- Let the soap suds go down the drain before you move around in the shower. Do not turn suddenly.
- If you are prone to falling, use a shower chair and a handheld shower attachment.
- Clean up puddles of water immediately.
- If using a bath, put a non-slip mat in your bath
- Do not lock the bathroom door. That will delay help in reaching you.
- Arrange clothes in your closet so they are easy to reach.
- Ensure your bedding/sheets are not trailing on the floor.

Stairs

- Never carry any package that will obstruct your view of the next step.
- Keep at least one hand on the handrail.
- Concentrate on what you are doing. Don't be distracted by sounds.
- Don't keep anything on the stairs, even temporarily.

- Consider a two way switch on your stairs, one at the top, one at the bottom, so you are never using the stairs in the dark. Ensure that the edge of each step is easy to see.

Vision/Lighting

- Wear glasses if you need them, but remove reading glasses before you walk.
- Have your eyes checked regularly. Do not put off getting new glasses.
- Keep your home well lit. Consider installing a plug-in night light to help you see if you need to get up in the middle of the night.
- Keep flashlights handy in event of a power outage.

Medication Side Effects

- Feeling weak or dizzy can be a possible side effect of many medications and can increase the risk of falls. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about side effects caused by your medications, and read the information about side effects that comes with each of your prescriptions.

Sensible Shoes

- Buy properly fitting, sturdy shoes with nonskid soles.
- Avoid shoes with extra-thick soles.
- Choose lace-up shoes instead of slip-ons, and keep the laces tied
- Select footwear with fabric fasteners if you have trouble tying laces.

What should I do if I fall at home?

After a fall, panic is often the first reaction. However, it's important to remain calm. How you react after a fall can cause more injuries than the fall itself. If you try to get up too quickly or in the wrong position you may make an injury worse. Here are the steps to follow:

- Take several deep breaths, assess the situation and determine if you are hurt.
- If you believe you are injured, do not attempt to get up. Instead, call 999 or get help from a family member/friend.

Can my medication increase my risk of falling?

Some medicines can actually increase your risk for falling. The reason is that many of them have side effects such as drowsiness, fainting, or extreme weakness.

If you are taking any of the drugs that may have these side effects - **DO NOT STOP TAKING THEM UNTIL YOU TALK TO YOUR DOCTOR.** With all medicines, the risk

must be weighed against the good it will do. This is a decision that you and your doctor should make.

Always ask your doctor:

- What does the medicine do?
- When should I take it?
- How should I take it (with meals, not with dairy products, etc.)?
- What are the possible side effects (how your body might react to the medicine)?
- Will the medicine react to any other medicines, foods, drink or herbal supplements I take?
- Should I avoid doing anything while I am taking it (e.g. driving)?
- How will I know if the medicine is working?