

Senior Health: Preventing Falls



How might a fall change your life? If you fall and can get right up, then the fall may not cause any long-term problems. But as you get older, falls are more likely to cause serious problems. A broken bone or a head injury can lead to big changes in lifestyle and quality of life.

Learn which things in your life might make you more likely to fall. Then you can take steps and make simple changes to protect yourself from a life-changing fall.

What increases your risk for falling?

Do you have health or vision problems or take medicines? Are there objects around your house or yard that you must walk around, step over, or reach for? All of these can make you more likely to fall. Here are some common causes of falls in older adults.

Health issues

You are more likely to lose your balance or trip and fall if:

- You cannot see well.
- You have dizzy spells, get dizzy easily, or have problems with balance.
- You sometimes get confused.
- You have weakness, pain, or loss of feeling in a leg or foot.
- You have recently had surgery.

Other risks

Other things that can cause falls include:

- Poor lighting.
- Uneven or slippery surfaces.
- Clutter, furniture, or small pets in your path.
- Objects that are just out of reach, either too high or too far away.

What you can do to prevent a fall

Make changes to stay safe at home

- Remove throw rugs and clutter. Keep things in the same place. If they are not where you expect them to be, you are more likely to trip over them.
- Repair loose carpet or raised areas in the floor that may cause you to trip. Use nonskid floor wax, and wipe up spills right away, especially on ceramic tile floors.
- Place furniture and electrical cords out of walking paths.
- Keep your house well lit. Use night-lights or keep the overhead light on at night in hallways and bathrooms.
- Install sturdy handrails on stairways, and put grab handles and nonskid mats inside and outside your shower or tub and near the toilet. Use a shower chair or bath bench when you bathe.

- Store items within easy reach, and place them so that you do not need to reach overhead for them. Reaching too far can make you fall.
- Keep a cordless phone and a flashlight with new batteries by your bed.
- If you have ice and snow during the winter, have a family member or friend sprinkle salt or sand on slippery steps and sidewalks.
- Call your doctor if you are dizzy or lose your balance. You may have a health problem that needs treatment, such as an inner ear problem. If needed, a physical therapist can teach you special exercises to help with dizziness.

Take care of yourself

- Keep your bones strong. Talk to your doctor to be sure you are getting enough vitamin D and calcium.
- Whenever you are alone at home, carry a phone from room to room or wear an alarm device. Then you can quickly get help whenever you need it.
- Know the side effects of the medicines that you take. Ask your doctor if the medicines you take can affect your balance. For example, sleeping pills and some medicines for anxiety can affect your balance.
- Learn to do a few exercises for strength and balance. Practicing these each day can help you stay active and independent.
- Have your vision and hearing checked each year, or anytime you notice a change. If you have trouble seeing and hearing, you might not be able to avoid objects that make you lose your balance.

If you need help making your home fall-proof, ask your doctor to recommend an occupational therapist who can do a home evaluation for safety.

Learn to move wisely

- Stand up slowly.
- If you have a problem with balance, walk slowly. Wearing low-heeled shoes that fit well and give your feet good support can help. Use footwear with nonskid soles.
- If one of your legs is stronger than the other, get into a tub or shower with your weaker leg first. Get out with your stronger side first.
- If your doctor suggests it, use a cane or walker. Make sure you know how to safely use it and that it is the right size for you. Be aware that a cane or walker can slip out from under you on smooth, wet surfaces.

Do you have any questions or concerns after reading this information? It's a good idea to write them down and take them to your next doctor visit.