

## Senior Health: When Medicine Affects Your Balance



If your doctor prescribes a medicine that may make you feel confused, drowsy, or dizzy, pay attention to how it affects your balance and how it makes you feel. Take extra care to prevent a fall. A fall can lead to serious problems that can change your quality of life.

### What does "high-risk" mean?

High-risk means that a medicine can cause serious health problems or accidents. High-risk does not always mean "do not use." It can mean "use with care" when a medicine is more likely to help you than harm you.

### Tips to prevent falls when you take high-risk medicine

#### Be prepared for side effects

As you age, your body changes. When you take a medicine, you may get a stronger effect now than when you were younger. For example, you may get more dizzy or drowsy.

- If a medicine makes you feel confused, drowsy, or dizzy, rest until the side effect has passed.

- Talk to your doctor about all side effects you have. Your doctor may want to change your dose or your medicine.
- Make a list of everything you take. Include the dose and when you take it. Keep a copy with you, and take it to each doctor visit. Ask if there are any medicines that you do not need or should not take.
- Use one drugstore, if possible. Before filling a new prescription, give the pharmacist your list of medicines. Ask about possible interactions with anything you are taking. If you use more than one drugstore, make sure each one has your list.

#### Learn to move wisely

- Stand up slowly.
- If you have a problem with balance, walk carefully. Wear low-heeled shoes that fit well and give your feet good support. Use footwear with nonskid soles.
- If you are very weak or dizzy, have someone help you get up, walk, and bathe.
- 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.
- Use extra care if you use a cane, a walker, or crutches. They can slip out from under you on smooth, wet surfaces.
- If you have glasses, hearing aids, or both, be sure to use them.

#### Make changes to stay safe at home

- Remove throw rugs and clutter.
- 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.
- Keep walking paths clear. Place furniture and electrical cords out of the way.

- Keep your house well lit. At night, use night-lights and keep the overhead light on in hallways and bathrooms. Keep a cordless phone and a flashlight by your bed.
- Install sturdy handrails on stairways. Put grab bars and nonskid mats in your shower or tub and near the toilet. Use a shower chair or bath bench when you bathe.
- Store items within easy reach. Avoid reaching overhead.
- If you have ice and snow during the winter, have a family member or friend sprinkle salt or sand on slippery steps and sidewalks.
- You passed out (lost consciousness).
- You cannot get up after a fall.
- You believe you have serious or life-threatening injuries.
- You are having chest pain or trouble breathing.
- You are having trouble speaking, or you have new weakness or numbness on one side of your body.

**Call your doctor now** or seek medical care right away if:

- You feel faint.
- You develop severe pain.
- You think you may have passed out but are not sure.
- You hit your head or think you may have hit your head but are not sure.
- You think your medicine may have caused you to fall.

Watch closely for changes in your health, and be sure to contact your doctor if you have fallen, even if you are not hurt.

Do not feel embarrassed to let your doctor know you have fallen. Your doctor may be able to adjust your medicine or give other advice so you can prevent more falls.

### Take care of yourself

- Before you take any prescription or over-the-counter medicine, ask your doctor or pharmacist if it might make you lose your balance and fall.
- When you are alone at home or outdoors, carry a phone or emergency response transmitter with you. Then you can quickly call for help if you need it.
- Have your vision and hearing checked each year, or anytime you notice a change. Sight or hearing problems can cause falls.
- Talk to your doctor or physical therapist about exercises for improving your strength and balance. Exercise regularly.

### When to call your doctor

**Call 911** anytime you think you may need emergency care. For example, call if:

### Questions to ask your doctor

Make a list of your questions or concerns, and take it with you to your next doctor visit.