

## Your Health: How to Prevent Falls



Falls happen. They may not seem serious, but they can have dangerous results. Hitting your head can cause a head injury that could forever affect your ability to think, reason, and take care of yourself. Or, a fall can break a bone, leading to a need for surgery, months of therapy, and/or lasting nursing home care. If the break involves your hip, you could lose your ability to walk without help, or have other serious problems. Whatever your age or health, it makes sense to do all you can to prevent falls.

### What causes falls?

#### Your health

Many different health problems can make a fall more likely. For example, you may be more likely to fall if:

- You take certain medicines, alcohol, or illegal drugs that affect your balance or make you feel sleepy, woozy, or less alert.
- You have low blood pressure when you get up too quickly after sitting or lying down. This can make you feel lightheaded, tired, or weak. Certain medicines can lower your blood pressure.
- You have an inner ear disorder, such as Ménière's disease, which affects your balance.
- You have weakness or loss of feeling caused by a stroke.
- You are dehydrated, which means your body loses too much fluid or you don't drink enough fluids. This can make you feel dizzy or lightheaded.
- You have dementia, which can cause uncertainty and confusion.
- You have migraine headaches, which can make you feel dizzy.
- You have multiple sclerosis, which can cause weakness in the legs, leg dragging, or clumsiness. It may also affect your vision.
- You have had surgery, such as a knee or hip replacement, which causes you to have less strength or balance.

#### Your environment

A change to your environment can also cause falls. If you are not used to where things are in your home, you are more likely to bump into them or trip over them, causing a fall. The weather is also a factor. Rain or snow makes surfaces slick and easier to fall on.

### Making your home safe

If you cannot make changes to your home yourself, ask a loved one, or hire someone to do it.

- Take out raised doorway thresholds and throw rugs. Fix any carpet that is loose and pulls up.
- Pick up things. If children are in the house, be sure they do not leave toys or clothes on the floor. Pick up everything, even things like books, magazines, and newspapers.

- If stairs are a problem, put in handrails or find a way to put in a ramp.
- Arrange your furniture and electric cords to keep them out of walking paths.
- Use nonskid floor wax and wipe up spills right away, especially on tile floors.
- Keep your house well lit, especially stairways, porches, and outside walkways. Use night-lights in hallways and bathrooms.
- Add extra light switches, or use remote devices that go on or off when you clap your hands. These make it easier to turn lights on at night without getting up.
- Store household items on low shelves so you do not have to use a stool or reach high.
- Put in grab bars and nonskid mats inside and outside your shower or tub and near the toilet and sinks.
- Use shower chairs and bath benches.
- It is easy to trip over a cat, small dog, or other pet. If you have pets, keep them in one place at night, or use night-lights so you can see where they are. Train your pets not to jump or get underfoot.

## Other things you can do

### Watch how you move

- If you are very weak or dizzy, have someone help you to get out of bed, walk, and bathe.
- If you know you are having trouble with balance, walk slowly. Use your cane or walker if your health provider suggested it.
- Stand up slowly after sitting or lying down.
- Get into a tub or shower by putting your weaker leg in first. Get out of a tub or shower with your strong side first.

- Use a cane, walker, or crutches. Put rubber tips on the bottoms for extra grip. Clean the tips on a regular basis with a rough pad, such as steel wool.

### Talk to your doctor

- Call your doctor if you are dizzy and lose your balance. You may have a condition that needs treatment, such as an inner ear problem.
- Have your vision and hearing checked regularly. If you have poor vision or hearing, you may lose cues that help you avoid objects and keep your balance.

### Other tips

- Keep a cordless phone and a flashlight with new batteries by your bed.
- Wear low-heeled shoes that fit well and give your feet and ankles good support.
- Use footwear with soles that do not skid.
- Check the heels and soles of your shoes for wear. Repair or replace worn heels or soles.
- Do exercises that increase your balance and muscle tone. Talk to your doctor or physical therapist about doing activities that improve balance and strength.
- Know the side effects of your medicines. Some medicines, such as sleeping pills, can affect your balance.
- Use a hand-held shower head so that you can sit on a shower chair while bathing.
- 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.