

## Health and Human Sciences

### AGING WELL

*One in a series that focuses on improving outcomes for seniors and their families.*

#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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# Tips to Prevent Falls

*Kristen Kirby, Janelle Potetz, Becky Walters, Stephanie Woodcox*

**Everyone falls at some point. As we age, the chance of falling increases. It can happen anywhere: on the stairs, an icy driveway, a stepstool or ladder, or a place where you'd least expect it. Each year, 2.5 million older adults are treated in emergency departments for fall injuries. More than 700,000 people a year are hospitalized because of a fall injury, most often due to a head injury or hip fracture, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says. It is important to recognize when you are at higher risk for a fall — and to know some safety measures to help avoid a fall.**

#### REDUCING THE RISKS

Medical conditions, medications, and lifestyle choices can put us at higher risk for falling. All medications have side effects and risks, and all medications interact with other medications and foods. It is important that your medical provider knows what medications you take — all of them, including over-the-counter and herbal medications.

Many falls occur at home. That makes sense, because we spent so much time there. We get used to our surroundings. It's good to feel comfortable. But things have a way of accumulating. A box here, another item there, and suddenly it's not as easy to get around. You may not realize it, but the risk of falling has increased.

When your medical provider considers your age, health and environment and how they relate to falling, here are some factors he/she considers:

- Medications for heart, lung and mental conditions.
- Medical diagnoses, such as low blood pressure, being undernourished or having visual problems.
- Alcohol use that is more than 7 drinks/week, or binge drinking.
- Any recreational drug use.
- A previous fall within the past 12 months.
- Throw rugs in the home.

- Cluttered pathways and having to walk around furniture to get to a pathway.
- Telephone wires, lamp cords and extension cords.
- Broken or uneven flooring or steps (including torn carpet, tile, linoleum).
- Dark hallways or stairways.
- Loose handrails or grab bars on stairways or in bathroom.
- Slippery tub/shower floor.
- Items used frequently stored on high shelving.

## WAYS TO PREVENT FALLS

Something to keep in mind: Studies have shown that, for older persons, general exercise reduces the risk for falls. Exercise programs that specifically target balance components are most effective. Here are some recommended guidelines for adults over the age of 65. **Note:** *Talk with your healthcare provider before starting any new exercise activity.*

- **Aerobic activity:** at least 30 minutes, 5 days per week.
- **Muscle strength:** weight training, weight-bearing calisthenics, or resistance training.
- **Flexibility:** 10 minutes of stretching the major muscle groups on the days that aerobic activity or muscle strengthening is performed.
- **Balance training:** improves stability and can help prevent falls. An example is Tai Chi, which can be done at home and does not require special equipment.

Here are some tips for you to help prevent a fall in your own living space. If you feel that you cannot safely make these changes on your own, ask a family member or friend — or hire someone. It's important that your home environment is safe.

- Remove throw rugs from the home, or use double-sided tape to assure that rugs will not slip.
- Arrange furniture so there is a clear pathway through the home.
- Replace burned-out light bulbs. Add night lights in dark hallways/stairwells and between the bathroom and bedroom. Hire an electrician to add an outlet, if needed.
- Add hand rails or grab bars. Fix any that are loose.
- Avoid long nightgowns.
- Add a non-slip rubber mat or self-stick strips to the floor of a tub or shower.
- Always wear non-slip footwear when walking around the house.
- Store items that are frequently used on shelves below shoulder level.



### QUICK TIP

*Consider a call alarm system. If you fall, it will allow help to arrive and care for you quickly.*

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