

Falls

What are the risks of falls?

The chances of falling increase as you get older. About one third of older adults living at home fall each year. Over one half of older adults who live in nursing facilities fall each year. Most falls happen indoors during normal activities and are related to health problems and dangers caused by uneven or slippery floors or steep stairs.

Older adults are more likely to break a bone when they fall. Osteoporosis, which thins and weakens bones so that they break more easily, is a common medical problem in older adults, especially in women. Most of the time you will be able to recover quickly from a fall, but if you break a bone, you could have life-long problems.

A serious fall often brings about a loss of confidence, fear of falling, and a dependence on others. Falls are the leading cause of accidental death in people over 65.

Why am I more likely to fall as I get older?

As you get older, your eyesight and hearing tend to get worse. Your reflexes are not as fast as they used to be, and your muscles may be weaker. When you trip or lose your balance, it may be harder to stop yourself from falling. Medicines or alcohol may cause lightheadedness. Medical problems, such as heart disease or low blood pressure, can make it easier to lose your balance. Arthritis can also throw you off balance.

What should I do after a fall?

If you have had a fall, seek medical help. A fall can be serious even if you don't think you are badly hurt. You may break a bone and still be able to get up. Also, it can be very serious if you hit your head when you fall.

Your healthcare provider will examine you and may order X-rays or other tests to check for broken bones and problems that might have led to the fall. Sometimes a fall is the first symptom of a serious illness.

How can I help prevent falls and injuries from falls?

- Have your vision and hearing checked regularly.
- If your healthcare provider has advised you to use a walker or cane, always use it when you walk.
- Get up slowly after you have been lying down or resting. Sit down if you feel lightheaded.
- Don't wear clothing that is long enough to trip over.
- Sit down to pull on pants and underwear. It's easy to trip yourself if you try to step into pants or a skirt while you are standing up.

- Wear low-heeled shoes that fasten securely. Avoid shoes with soles that are too slippery or too sticky, such as some crepe or rubber soles. Avoid wearing high heels and sandals with light straps.
- Take medicines as directed. Tell your provider if you think medicine you are taking affects your balance or causes lightheadedness or dizziness.
- Follow a healthy lifestyle to prevent health problems that could lead to a fall or be made worse by a fall:
- Stay fit with the right kind of exercise for you. Exercise helps keep your muscles strong and joints flexible. Exercise also helps prevent osteoporosis. A healthy goal for most adults is to exercise for 2 hours and 30 minutes or more each week. You don't need to do 30 minutes of activity all at once. You can do shorter periods of exercise, at least 10 minutes each time. Stop and rest if you feel tired or faint.
- Try to keep a healthy weight. If you are overweight, lose weight.
- If you smoke, try to quit. Talk to your healthcare provider about ways to quit smoking.
- If you want to drink alcohol, ask your healthcare provider how much is safe for you to drink.
- Eat a healthy diet. Ask your provider about the benefits of talking to a dietician to learn what you need in a healthy diet.

What can I do to make my home safer?

Check your home for hazards such as slippery floors, worn or loose rugs and stair treads, furniture in the way, poor lighting, and trailing electric cords.

- Try to have nonslip floors. Use nonskid mats, especially on floors that may get wet.
- Make sure all stairways have secure rails. If possible, try to avoid trips to the basement. Have your washer and dryer on the main living level if you can.
- Make sure that carpet and stair treads are tacked down firmly. Replace or cover worn areas of carpet or treads. Avoid loose throw rugs.
- Use good lighting inside and outside your home. Have light switches at both ends of stairs and hallways. Keep a small night-light on in case you need to get up at night.
- Arrange furniture so that it is not in the way when you walk around the house.
- Install grab bars for the bathtub, shower, and toilet. Use nonslip mats in the bathtub or shower.
- Store food and regularly used items where you can reach them easily. Avoid heavy lifting and climbing on step stools or ladders to reach high places. Get help when you need it.
- Be careful around pets you could trip over or that might push you down when they are playing.
- Keep items you could trip over--like electric cords, oxygen tubing, clothing, and craft items (like yarn)--off the floor or out of common walking areas.

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