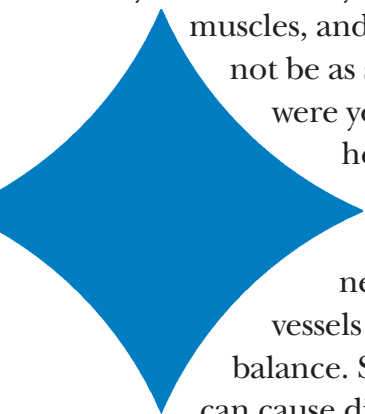


AgePage

Falls and Fractures

A simple thing can change your life—like tripping on a rug or slipping on a wet spot on the kitchen floor. If you fall, then you might be like the thousands of older men and women each year who break, or fracture, a bone. A broken bone might not sound awful. But, for older people, a break can be the start of more serious problems.

Many things can make you more likely to fall. Your eyesight, hearing, muscles, and reflexes might not be as sharp as when you were younger. Diabetes, heart disease, or problems with your thyroid, nerves, or blood vessels can affect your balance. Some medicines can cause dizziness.



Then there's osteoporosis—a disease that makes bones weak and more likely to break easily. Many people think osteoporosis is only a problem for women past menopause, but it can also affect older men. Weak bones can mean that even a minor fall might be dangerous.

Don't let a fear of falling keep you from being active. Doing things like getting together with friends, gardening, walking, or going to the local senior center are also important for staying healthy. The good news is that there are simple ways you can prevent most falls.

Take the Right Steps

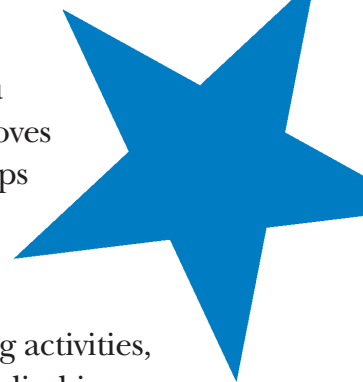
If you take care of your overall health, you may be able to lower your chances of falling. Most of the time, falls and accidents don't "just happen." Here are a few hints that will help you avoid falls and broken bones:

- ◆ Learn how strong your bones are. Ask your doctor about a special test called a bone mineral density test. If this test shows your bones are weak, your doctor can tell you how to make them stronger and less likely to break.
- ◆ Stay physically active. Plan an exercise program that is right for you. Regular

exercise makes you stronger and improves muscles. It also helps keep your joints, tendons, and ligaments flexible.

Mild weight-bearing activities, such as walking or climbing stairs, may slow bone loss from osteoporosis. Get the free booklet, *Exercise & Physical Activity: Your Everyday Guide from the National Institute on Aging*. See the last panel of this *AgePage* for more information.

- ◆ Have your eyes and hearing tested often. Even small changes in sight and hearing can put you at risk for falling. When you get new eyeglasses, take time to get used to them. Always wear your glasses when you need them. If you have a hearing aid, be sure it fits well, and wear it.
- ◆ Find out about the side effects of any medicine you take. If a drug makes you sleepy or dizzy, tell your doctor or pharmacist.
- ◆ Get enough sleep. If you are sleepy, you are more likely to fall.
- ◆ Limit the amount of alcohol you drink. Even a small amount can affect your balance and reflexes.



◆ Stand up slowly after eating, lying down, or sitting. Getting up too quickly can cause your blood pressure to drop. That can make you feel faint.

◆ Use a cane, walking stick, or walker to help you feel steadier when you walk. This is very important when you're walking in areas you don't know well or in places where the walkways are uneven. And be very careful when walking on wet or icy surfaces. They can be very slippery! Try to have sand or salt spread on icy areas by your front or back door.

◆ Wear rubber-soled, low-heeled shoes that fully support your feet. Wearing only socks or shoes/slippers with smooth soles on stairs or floors without carpet can be unsafe.

◆ You might want to think about buying a home monitoring system service. Usually, you wear a button on a chain around your neck. If you fall or need emergency help, you just push the button to alert the service. You can find local “medical alarm” services in your yellow pages. Most medical-insurance companies and Medicare do not cover items like home monitoring systems. Be sure to ask about cost. You will probably have to pay for it yourself.

And, always tell your doctor if you have fallen since your last checkup—even if you aren't hurt when you fall.

Make Your Home Safe

You can help prevent falls by following a few safety rules and by making changes to unsafe areas in your home.

In stairways, hallways, and pathways:

- ◆ Have handrails on both sides of all stairs from top to bottom, and make sure they are tightly fastened.
- ◆ Hold the handrails when you use the stairs, going up or down. If you must carry something while you're on the stairs, hold it in one hand and use the handrail with the other. Don't let it block your view of the steps. Go down or up the stairs sitting on each step in turn if you think you have problems with your vision or balance.
- ◆ Make sure there is good lighting with light switches at the top and bottom of stairs and each end of a long hall.
- ◆ Keep areas where you walk tidy. Don't leave things on the floor—you might trip on them.
- ◆ Check that all carpets are fixed firmly to the floor so they won't slip.

Put no-slip strips on tile and wooden floors. You can buy these strips at the hardware store.

In bathrooms and powder rooms:

- ◆ Mount grab bars near toilets and on both the inside and outside of your tub and shower.
- ◆ Place non-skid mats, strips, or carpet on all surfaces that may get wet.
- ◆ Keep night lights on.

In your bedroom:

- ◆ Put night lights and light switches close to your bed.
- ◆ Keep your telephone near your bed.

In other living areas:

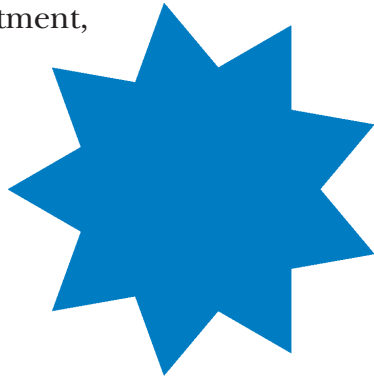
- ◆ Keep electric cords and telephone wires near walls and away from walking paths.
- ◆ Tack down all carpets and area rugs firmly to the floor.
- ◆ Arrange your furniture (especially low coffee tables) and other objects so they are not in your way when you walk.
- ◆ Make sure your sofas and chairs are the right height for you, so that you can get in and out of them easily.

- ◆ Stay away from a freshly washed floor.
- ◆ Don't take chances. Keep the things you use regularly in the kitchen within easy reach.
- ◆ Don't stand on a chair or table to reach something that's too high—use a “reach stick” instead. Reach sticks are special grabbing tools that you can buy at many hardware or medical-supply stores. If you use a step stool, make sure it is stable and has a handrail on top. Try to have someone stand next to you.
- ◆ Don't let your home get too cold or too hot—being very cold or very hot can make you dizzy. In the summer, if your home is not air-conditioned, keep cool with an electric fan, drink lots of liquids, and limit physical activity. In the winter, don't let the nighttime temperature drop below 65 °F.
- ◆ Keep emergency numbers in large print near each telephone.

Home Improvements To Prevent Falls

Many State and local governments have education and/or home modification programs to help older people prevent falls. Check with your

local health department, division of elder affairs, or area agency on aging to see if there is a program near you. See *For More Information* to contact the Eldercare Locator for help.



Rebuilding Together has a “Home Safety Checklist” you can use to help you lower your risk of falling at home. See their listing in *For More Information*.

For More Information

Here are some helpful resources:

Eldercare Locator

1-800-677-1116 (toll-free)

www.eldercare.gov

National Center for Injury Prevention and Control

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

4770 Buford Highway, NE

MS F-63

Atlanta, GA 30341-3717

1-800-232-4636 (toll-free)

1-888-232-6348 (TTY/toll-free)

www.cdc.gov/ncipc

National Resource Center on Supportive Housing and Home Modification

3715 McClintock Avenue

Los Angeles, CA 90089-0191

1-213-740-1364

www.homemods.org

Rebuilding Together

1899 L Street, NW, Suite 1000

Washington, DC 20036

1-800-473-4229 (toll-free)

www.rebuildingtogether.org

For more information on osteoporosis, home safety for people with Alzheimer’s disease, or other resources on health and aging, including *Exercise & Physical Activity: Your Everyday Guide from the National Institute on Aging*, contact:

National Institute on Aging Information Center

P.O. Box 8057

Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057

1-800-222-2225 (toll-free)

1-800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

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Visit NIHSeniorHealth

(www.nihseniorhealth.gov), a senior-friendly website from the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine. This website has health information for older adults. Special features make it simple to use. For example, you can click on a button to have the text read out loud or to make the type larger.



National Institute on Aging

National Institutes of Health
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Human Services

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