

Preventing Falls and Fractures

Adapted from the National Institute on Aging

At any age, an injury from falling can limit a person's ability to lead an active, independent life. This is especially true for older people. Each year thousands of older men and women are disabled, sometimes permanently, by falls that result in broken bones. Yet many of those injuries could be prevented by making simple changes in the home.

As people age, changes in their vision, hearing, muscle strength, coordination and reflexes make them more likely to fall. Older persons are also more likely to have treatable disorders that may affect their balance – including diabetes or conditions of the heart, nervous system, and thyroid. In addition, compared with younger people, older persons take more drugs that may cause dizziness or lightheadedness.

Preventing falls is especially important for people who have osteoporosis, a condition in which bone mass decreases so that bones are more fragile and break easily. Osteoporosis is a major cause of bone fractures in women after menopause and older persons in general. Although all bones are affected, fractures of the spine, wrist, and hip are the most common. For persons with severe osteoporosis, even a minor fall may cause one or more bones to break.

Falls and accidents seldom “just happen,” and many can be prevented. There are simple steps you can take to make your home safer and reduce the likelihood of falling. The following are some guidelines for preventing falls and fractures.

Everyday Activities

- Have your vision and hearing tested regularly and properly corrected.
- Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about the side effects of the medicines you are taking and how they may affect your coordination or balance. Ask them to suggest ways to reduce the possibilities of falling.
- Limit your intake of alcohol. Even a little alcohol can disturb already impaired balances and reflexes.
- Use caution in getting up too quickly after eating, lying down, or resting. High or low blood pressure may cause dizziness at these times.
- Make sure that the nighttime temperature in your home is no lower than 65 °F. Prolonged exposure to cold temperatures may cause body temperature to drop, leading to dizziness and falling. Many older people cannot tolerate cold as well as younger people can.
- Use a cane, walking stick or walker to help maintain balance on uneven or unfamiliar ground or if you feel dizzy. Use special caution in walking outdoors on wet and icy pavement.
- Wear supportive rubber-soled or low-heeled shoes. Avoid wearing only socks or smooth slippers on stairs and waxed floors. They make it very easy to slip.

- Maintain a regular program of exercise. Regular physical activity improves strength and muscle tone, which will help you move more easily and keep joints, tendons and ligaments more flexible. Many older people enjoy walking and swimming. Mild weight-bearing activities may even reduce the loss of bone due to osteoporosis. It is important, however, to check with your doctor or physical therapist to plan a suitable exercise program.

Beyond these everyday activities there are a number of things you can do around your home to prevent falls. Many falls that occur among older people result from hazardous conditions at home. The following is a brief checklist to help you recognize and correct such hazards.

Safety Checklist for your Home

Check to see that the different areas in your home have these safety features.

Stairways, hallways and patio area:

- Good lighting and are free of clutter
- Firmly attached carpet, rough texture or abrasive steps to secure footing.
- Tightly fastened handrails running the entire length and along both sides of all stairs, with light switches at the top and bottom.

Bathrooms

- Grab bars conveniently located in and out of tubs and showers and near toilets.

- Nonskid mats, abrasive strips or carpet on all surfaces that may get wet.
- Nightlights

Bedrooms

- Nightlights or light switches within reach of the bed (s).
- Easily reached telephones, convenient to the bed (s).

Living Areas

- Electrical cords and telephone wires placed out of walking paths.
- Rugs well secured to the floor.
- Furniture (especially low coffee table) and other objects arranged so that they are not in the way.
- Couches and chairs at proper height to get into and out of easily.

For more Information contact:

National Institute on Aging
<http://www.nia.nih.gov/>

The Health Promotion Unit at the NYC Department for the Aging conducts lectures on Falls Prevention for senior groups in New York City. For more information please call 3-1-1.