

Preventing falls: Tips for older adults

Thousands of older Americans are affected by falls each year, many of which occur in the home. The best approach is prevention. There are many easy steps you can take to keep yourself safe.

Why are falls so dangerous?

Falls are a leading cause of injury and death among older people. Falls are especially dangerous for women. Because of a loss of bone strength (osteoporosis), older women are at risk for breaking a hip if they fall.

The best way to reduce your risk of falling is to use common-sense precautions for yourself and at your home.

What can I do for myself?

- Have a physical exam each year.
- If you feel your vision, hearing, or sense of balance has changed, talk to your clinician.
- Wear your glasses and hearing aids when you're awake.
- Use special care when wearing new glasses.
- If you have blind spots in your vision, look around before taking a step by slowly moving your head to each side.
- Use these techniques to avoid dizziness:
 - Get up slowly from a lying or sitting position.
 - Prop your head on a pillow when you lie down.
 - Sit on the side of the bed for a moment before standing up.
 - Don't work with your arms raised above your head.

What can I do to keep my home safe?

Some home safety projects are easy to do yourself. For others, you may need to ask a friend or relative for help, or ask a landlord for permission. Some changes can be costly.

Lighting

- Set up the lights in your home so that you can avoid entering dark rooms and hallways. Have light switches next to doorways and use nightlights.
- Consider timers and noise- or movement-activated lights that come on automatically.
- Cut down on glare and shadows by using high-watt, low-glare bulbs (not fluorescent). Avoid high-gloss floor and furniture polishes.

Floors and carpets

- Keep floors free of objects.
- For loose carpets and throw rugs, tack them down, add non-slip padding, or remove them.
- Use non-skid waxes and floor cleaners on bare floors.
- Put bright tape on thresholds.

Stairs

- Have light switches at the top and bottom.

- Install handrails on both sides.
- Use non-skid surfaces, add rubber treads, and put bright tape on the edge of each step.

Living areas and bedroom

- Make a clear path through each room.
- Remove clutter and extra furniture.
- Never use a chair as a stepladder; use a sturdy step-stool.

Bathrooms

- Use non-skid mats on the bathroom floor and in the shower or tub.
- Install grip bars on the walls beside the bath and toilet
- Use a non-skid plastic shower chair in the shower or tub.

How do I reach help easily in an emergency?

- Put telephones in easy-to-reach spots.
- Post emergency numbers next to telephones or program your phone with them.
- Keep a cell phone or cordless telephone close at hand.
- Consider using a Personal Emergency Response System (PERS) (visit Patient Gateway to access the "PERS" handout).

What about exercise?

Regular exercise helps prevent falls by strengthening your muscles and keeping your reflexes quick. Weight-bearing exercise, like walking, also helps keep bones strong. Be sure to talk to your clinician before starting any new exercise program.

Ask for a handout with exercises you can do at home to improve your balance. If you are at high risk of falls or worried about falling, consider physical therapy to work on your balance.

Where can I get more information?

- "Live Long Walk Strong" is a clinical program at Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital's Outpatient Centers designed to prevent falls and fall-related injuries.
<http://spauldingrehab.org/conditions-and-treatments/live-long-walk-strong>.
- CDC. "Check for Safety: A home fall prevention checklist for older adults."
https://www.cdc.gov/steady/pdf/check_for_safety_brochure-a.pdf.
- National Institute on Aging. "Prevent falls and fractures."
<https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/prevent-falls-and-fractures>
- National Falls Prevention Resource Center. Resources for older adults and caregivers. <https://www.ncoa.org/center-for-healthy-aging/falls-resource-center/>
- Home improvement; funding resources:
 - Massachusetts Council on Aging office:
mcoaonline.com; 800-252-0155
 - Massachusetts Executive Office of Elderly Affairs:
www.mass.gov/orgs/executive-office-of-elder-affairs; 617-727-7750
 - National Resource Center on Supportive Housing and Home Modifications: Promotes aging in place, offers training and education.
www.homemods.org; 213-740-1364

- Rebuilding Together: Provides repair and renovation services through a national network of affiliates.
www.rtboston.org; 617-971-0058; 800-473-4229
- US Department of Housing and Urban Development:
www.hud.gov/topics/home_improvements

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