

Falls

What are the risks of falls?

The chances of falling increase as you get older. About half the falls older people have are due to accidents, and about half are health-related. Most falls result in a quick recovery. However, some falls, particularly those that result in fractures, cause permanent disability and can even shorten lives.



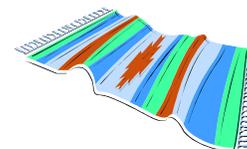
Falls cause more bone fractures in older people because osteoporosis (weak bones) affects 1 in 4 women age 60 or older and nearly half of all people over age 75. By the age of 90, 1 woman in 4 has fallen and fractured her hip. For people living alone and unable to get up, falls can result in hypothermia (loss of body temperature), pneumonia, and sometimes death. A serious fall often brings about a loss of confidence, fear of falling, and a dependence on others.

How do falls occur?

As you get older, eyesight and hearing decline. Reflexes tend to be slow. There is less coordination and muscle strength to take action in avoiding a fall.

Medical conditions like heart disease or low blood pressure can affect balance.

Medicines or the use of alcohol may cause lightheadedness. Arthritis can throw you off balance, and osteoporosis can weaken bones so that they break easily. In addition, people often aren't aware of the fall hazards they have in their homes. Common hazards include slippery floors, worn rugs and stair treads, furniture in the way, poor lighting, and trailing wires.



What are the symptoms that may lead to falls?

Feelings of dizziness, lightheadedness, or weakness may be present if there is an underlying medical problem. On the other hand, the fall itself may be the first symptom of serious illness, such as a heart attack, stroke, internal bleeding, or pneumonia. It may also be the first sign of a serious drinking problem. A fall that causes a bone fracture may be the first sign of osteoporosis.

What should I do after a fall?

Call your health care provider or your emergency number after a fall, even if there appears to be little or no injury. It is possible to fracture a hip and still be able to get up. Also, head injuries can be very serious. In addition, a fall may be the first symptom of other serious illness. Your health care provider will examine you and may order x-rays or other tests.



How can I take care of myself?

- ◆ Have your vision and hearing checked regularly and, if necessary, corrected.
- ◆ Increase the lighting in your home, inside and out.
- ◆ Use a cane or walker if advised to do so.
- ◆ If you are on medicine, take it regularly and as directed.
- ◆ Tell your health care provider if you think your medicine affects your balance or causes dizziness.
- ◆ If you are overweight, talk to your provider about weight control.
- ◆ Exercise daily to keep muscles in tone and help prevent osteoporosis.
- ◆ Eat calcium-rich food, such as dairy products and green vegetables, to help prevent osteoporosis.



Preventing falls in your home

Homes can be full of fall hazards. Common ones include slippery floors, worn 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.
- Carpet and stair treads should be tacked down firmly. Replace or cover worn areas on carpet or treads.
- Use good lighting. Have light switches at both ends of stairs and hallways.
- Have a small night light on in case you need to get up at night.
- Don't have loose or trailing electric cords across the floors.



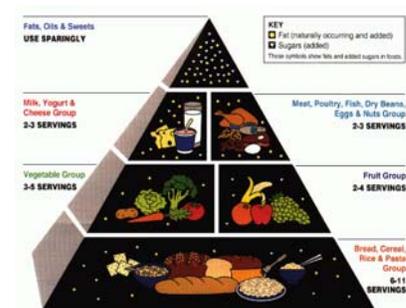
- Arrange furniture so it is not in the way when you walk around the house.
- Install grab bars for the bathtub, shower, and toilet.
- Don't use a long bathrobe you can trip over.

Store food and regularly used items where they can be easily reached.



Preventing falls in your daily activities

- ◆ Get up slowly after lying down or resting. Sit down if you feel lightheaded.
- ◆ Wear rubber-soled, low-heeled shoes that fasten securely.
- ◆ Eat a healthy, low-fat, balanced diet, with plenty of fiber. Don't go without food.
- ◆ Eat three or four smaller meals a day, rather than a single, large meal.
- ◆ Exercise daily to keep muscles firm and joints flexible. Stop and rest if you feel faint.
- ◆ Limit your use of alcohol.
- ◆ Be careful if you have pets that might trip you or push you down when playing.



Developed by Ann Carter, MD, for McKesson Health Solutions LLC.

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