

Preventing Falls



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.

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- 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.

Source: <http://www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation/Publications/falls.htm>

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