

Preventing Falls at Home



As we age, the risk of falling increases—even more in women than men. And often, once a person falls, they tend to fall again within six months. So why is falling such a problem? For starters, our bodies have just changed too much.

Regular exercise and a healthy diet are two of the most important preventative actions we can take, but as we age, these principles may become more difficult. Unfortunately, this can lead to poor muscle tone, loss of bone mass, and decreased flexibility and muscle strength. Thus, falling becomes even easier.

Although it's impossible to pinpoint one cause for falling, we can identify specific risk factors that increase the likelihood of falling and learn ways to prevent just that.

RISK FACTORS

Lack of Physical Activity

- Causes: Age, injury, and not enough time are all easy reasons to skip out on exercise
- Prevention:
 - Try light exercise on a daily or every other day basis. Activities may include walking, swimming, yoga, and even pilates;
 - Perform daily activities/chores with caution; ie, bend at the knees when lifting an object, wear supportive shoes with rubber

- soles, etc.
- Osteoporosis**
 - Causes: Hormonal changes, a decrease in physical activity, and calcium and vitamin D deficiency
 - Prevention:
 - Eat/drink sufficient calcium; ie, milk, yogurt, cheese, fish, broccoli, soybeans, tofu, almonds, etc.;
 - Take a vitamin D supplement; and
 - Perform regular exercises with weights.

Poor Vision

- Causes: Problems such as cataracts and glaucoma increase with age and can affect a person's depth perception, glare reaction and total vision
- Prevention:
 - Schedule regular checkups with an ophthalmologist;
 - Keep eye glasses and contact lenses clean;
 - Apply a color strip to first and last steps of stairs or changes of levels in the home; and
 - Color strips may also be used to make handrails stand out.

Hazards in the Home

- Causes: Things like poor lighting, loose railing, and unsteady furniture can lead to falls. Tripping over rugs and other decorative items is also common
- Prevention:
 - Walk through your home and identify areas that may be dangerous;
 - Consider a visit from an occupational therapist who can identify problem areas and suggest solutions; and
 - Secure rugs with nonskid tape.

Medications

- Causes: As we age, we often have more medications to take for conditions like high blood pressure, diabetes, anxiety, depression, etc. These can affect balance and mental awareness which can increase the risk of falling.
- Prevention:

- Be aware of all common side effects of all medications you take;
- Throw away all expired medications;
- Limit alcohol while on any medications; and
- Speak with your doctor/pharmacist about medications and if they will increase your risk of falling.

OTHER TIPS

When it comes to your home, there are a few things you can do to decrease your chances of falls. Try these tips:

- Tidy up and remove that clutter;
- Make sure a phone is on each level of the home with emergency numbers listed;
- Install grab bars around the tub and toilet;
- Use nonskid mats inside and outside of the tub;
- Install a hand-held shower head or think about using a seat;
- Use step stools for things out of reach; and
- Stay away from floor polishes or waxes.

As for the outdoors, you can prevent falls with these helpful suggestions:

- Again, clean away the clutter;
- Check for cracks and uneven edges of sidewalks/driveways and schedule repairs;
- Install handrails on stairs/steps;
- Keep walkways well-lit; and
- In the winter, be sure to keep walkways shoveled and salted.

Hopefully these tips will help you decrease your likelihood of falling in the home. Be sure to talk to your physician and/or physical therapist about other ways to prevent falls. ■

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