

The Unexpected Trip:

A Fall Prevention Guide for Older Adults



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HEALTHCARE

Alice, after sitting on the couch for a while, stood up quickly when she heard the phone ring. As she dashed to her kitchen to answer it, she tripped over her lamp cord and fell on her right side, fracturing her hip. This scenario plays out all too often in the lives of older adults. At least one-third to one-half of the population over 65 years of age will experience a fall, which accounts for over 90 percent of the hip fractures suffered by older adults. Also, falls and related injuries are the most frequent preventable cause of nursing home admission.

As devastating as a fall can be, it is important to emphasize that most falls are preventable. There are many ways that older adults and family members can ensure safety in the home setting. However, if you do fall, you will need a medical evaluation – urgent attention if there is an injury or at least a routine evaluation to find the cause and prevent the next fall.

Steps to Take to a Safer YOU

Everyone is at risk of falling. However, as we age, we are more at risk than ever before due to physical changes. Medical conditions such as vision problems, arthritis and depression, can also contribute to falls. The following are some helpful tips to ensuring your safety wherever you go:

- See your eye doctor once a year for a check-up. Preserving your vision can greatly reduce your risk of falls.
- Take good care of your feet. See your podiatrist (foot doctor) or physician if you have pain or difficulty walking. Also, wear shoes with a firm sole and steer clear of house slippers and “slip-ons.” Avoid going barefoot as well; wear shoes at all times.
- Talk with your doctor about medication side effects. Have your healthcare provider (physician or pharmacist) review your medications to check for possible harmful interactions or side effects that can lead to falls.
- Be active. Physical activity can greatly decrease your risk of falling because it helps to improve your balance and coordination. Talk with your physician about physical activities that will work for you.
- Use a cane or walker if your physician has suggested it. Walking devices can provide extra stability and help to avoid falls.
- After sitting or lying down, pause for a few seconds before you stand up, to allow your blood pressure to adjust to your movements. Many falls occur after standing too quickly when your blood pressure is low.
- Consider purchasing a personal emergency response system. This would include a necklace with a button to press if you ever fell and could not get to the phone. The monitoring agency would then contact the appropriate persons for assistance.

Make Your Home Safer

Many falls occur in the home due to environmental hazards. The following is a list of helpful tips to prevent falls from taking place in your home:

Kitchen

- Remove small throw rugs as they are a trip hazard. If you must keep them, use double-sided tape to secure them to the floor.
- Make sure everything in your kitchen is within reach so that you do not need to climb.
- Avoid using step stools.
- Immediately wipe up any spills to prevent slipping.

Bathroom

- Have grab bars installed in your tub or shower and next to the toilet.
- Use a shower seat with a hand-held shower head to prevent falls when bathing.
- Mount a raised toilet seat on the toilet.
- Use a non-slip bath mat inside the tub.
- Install a night light in bathrooms as well as hallways.
- Immediately wipe up moisture or spills.

Stairs and Walkways

- Install handrails on both sides of the stairs.
- Avoid placing anything on the stairs for decoration.
- Make sure all stairs are well lit.
- Remove any items in a walkway (books, papers, clothes, and furniture) that can cause a fall.

Living Area

- Make sure you have plenty of space to move around your furniture.
- Place all electrical cords outside the walking area, preferably next to the walls.
- Keep the phone near your favorite couch or chair.
- Keep an eye out for your pets! Make sure you know their whereabouts at all times so as not to trip over them.

Bedroom

- Keep a portable commode next to your bed if you have difficulty getting to the bathroom during the night.
- Keep necessary items like your eyeglasses and telephone next to your bed for easy access.
- Remove clutter as this may promote falls.

Lighting in the Home

- Improve the lighting in your home by adding brighter light bulbs. To diminish glare, use lamp shades and frosted bulbs.

Outside the Home

- Have handrails installed on both sides of the steps leading to your house.
- Paint front edges of steps a contrasting color to improve visibility.
- Keep walkway clear of clutter, leaves, moss and weeds.
- Install path lights, preferably ones which turn on and off automatically.

Helpful Resources:

Center for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control – www.cdc.gov/ncipc

Fall Prevention Center for Excellence - www.stopfalls.org

Home Safety Council – www.homesafetycouncil.org

National Safety Council - www.nsc.org/issues/fallstop

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