



## **What Every Senior Should Know About Falling**

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I am 68 years old and very active. I have ridden a bicycle from Seattle to Portland several times. I have hiked 15 miles without a problem. I never thought I was at risk to fall and injure myself. At age 65 when walking down stairs while making rounds at a hospital I slipped on a step and fell down hitting my head and lacerating my scalp. I was lucky that I was not more seriously injured. Anyone can slip on stairs. I slipped because I am no longer as flexible, as strong or as coordinated as I was at 55 or 45 or 17. I have a greater risk of falling than my younger friends and colleagues. Now when going down stairs - I always use the hand rail.

The facts about falls among us seniors are well known:

- Every year one third of those over 65 and living at home will fall
- If living in a long term care facility more than half of us will experience a fall within two years.
- In this age group falls are the leading cause of injury deaths which is about 15,000 nationwide.
- The older we get the greater risk we have for falling and experiencing severe injury.
- We are more likely to fall if we take any kind of sedating medication, drink alcohol, have poor vision or have known weakness or numbness in our arms or legs.
- Everyone must accept that with age comes some decrease in balance, strength, and flexibility.

So what can you do to reduce your risk of falling? Many falls can be prevented by doing a few simple things. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention has four recommendations to reduce the risk of falling.

### **1. Begin a regular exercise program**

Exercise is the most important way to lower your chances of falling. It makes you stronger and helps you feel better. Exercises that improve balance and coordination (like Tai Chi) are the most helpful. Any type of exercise for any period of time is better than none. The more you exercise the better your chances are at maintaining strength and balance. Lack of exercise leads to weakness and increases your chances of falling. Most local health or fitness clubs have strength building programs for seniors. You can also ask your doctor or health care provider about the best type of exercise program for you.

### **2. Have your health care provider review your medicines**

As you get older, the way medicines work in your body can change. Some medicines, or combinations of medicines, can make you sleepy or dizzy and can cause you to fall. All medicine both over the counter and prescription medications should be reviewed.

### **3. Have your vision checked**

Have your eyes checked by an eye doctor at least once a year. You may be wearing the wrong

glasses or have a condition like glaucoma or cataract that limits your vision. Poor vision can increase your chances of falling.

#### **4. Make your home safer**

About half of all falls happen at home. To make your home safer:

- Remove things you can trip over (like papers, books, clothes, and shoes) from stairs and places where you walk.
- Remove small throw rugs or use double-sided tape to keep the rugs from slipping.
- Keep items you use often in cabinets where you can reach easily without using a step stool.
- Have grab bars put in next to your toilet and in the tub or shower.
- Use non-slip mats in the bathtub and on shower floors.
- Improve the lighting in your home. As you get older, you need brighter lights to see well. Hang light-weight curtains or shades to reduce glare.
- Have handrails and lights put in on all staircases.
- Wear shoes both inside and outside the house. Avoid going barefoot or wearing slippers
- Use a sturdy stepstool with a handrail and wide steps instead of a ladder.

In summary all seniors must know that they are at risk to fall. Men especially are reluctant to admit that they are getting older and need to modify their behaviors to account for less strength and mobility. Every senior should have an exercise program, emphasizing strength, balance, and flexibility. The more we do the better prepared we will be, thus boosting our confidence. We should avoid risky medications and excessive alcohol use. We need our vision checked and corrected when possible. Finally we need to be thoughtful about making our homes as safe as possible. It is never too late to begin now. Following these simple steps will reduce your chances of falling so you can enjoy a more full and active life.