

Health Info from Harmony

Preventing falls and fractures

JUST ONE simple fall can change your life. Ask any of the thousands of older men and women who fall each year and break a bone. Getting older can bring many changes. Balance, for example, can be affected by diabetes and heart disease, or by problems with circulation, thyroid or nervous system.

Some medicines can cause dizziness. Any of these things can make a fall more likely.

Then there's osteoporosis—a disease that makes bones thin and likely to break easily. Osteoporosis is a major reason for broken bones in older women. It also affects older men.

Take the right steps

As we get older, falls and broken bones can be the start of more serious health problems. But they can often be prevented. Here's how:

Ask your doctor about taking a bone mineral density test that tells how strong your bones are—or about prescribing new medications that will help make your bones harder to break.

Talk with your doctor and plan an exercise program that can help keep you strong and improve muscle tone. It also helps keep your joints, tendons, and ligaments flexible. Mild weight-bearing exercise—such as walking, climbing stairs—may even slow bone loss from osteoporosis.

Have your vision and hearing tested often. But keep in mind that your new eyeglasses or hearing aids can also make you less stable.

Find out if the possible side effects of any medications you take affect coordination or balance. If so, ask your doctor or pharmacist what you can do to lessen your chance of falling.

Limit the amount of alcohol you drink. Even a small amount can affect your balance and reflexes.

Always stand up slowly after eat-

ing or resting. Getting up too quickly can cause your blood pressure to drop, which can make you feel faint.

Don't let your home get too cold or too hot...it can make you dizzy. In the summer, keep cool with air-conditioning or an electric fan, lots of liquids, and limited exercise. In the winter, keep the nighttime temperature at 65° or warmer.

Use a cane, walking stick, or walker to help you feel steadier when you walk—especially on slippery, uneven or unfamiliar areas. Try to have sand or salt spread on icy areas.

Wear rubber-soled, low-heeled shoes that fully support your feet, especially on stairs or waxed floors.

Hold the handrails when you use the stairs. If you must carry something while using the stairs, hold it in one hand and use the handrail with the other.

Time for a home monitoring system or a "reach stick"?

You may want to consider buying a home monitoring system, which is a button you wear on a chain around your neck. If you fall or need emergency help, just push the button and emergency staff is alerted and sent to your home. You can find local "medical alarm" services in your yellow pages.

And instead of standing on a chair to reach something that's too high, use a "reach stick." Reach sticks are special grabbing tools you can buy at many hardware or medical supply stores. Most medical insurance companies and Medicare don't cover home monitoring systems and reach sticks.

How to make your home safer

You can help prevent falls by making changes to unsafe areas in your home.

In bathrooms and powder rooms:

- Mount grab bars near toilets and on both the inside and outside of

your tub and shower.

- Place non-skid mats, strips, or carpet on all surfaces that may get wet.
- Keep night lights on.

In stairways, hallways, and pathways:

- Make sure there is good lighting with light switches at the top and bottom of the stairs.
- Keep areas where you walk tidy.
- Check that all carpets are fixed firmly to the floor so they won't slip. Put no-slip strips on tile and wooden floors. You can buy them at the hardware store.
- Have handrails on both sides of all stairs, tightly fastened, from top to bottom.

In your bedroom:

- Put night lights and light switches close to your bed.
- Keep your phone near your bed.

In other living areas:

- Keep electric cords and telephone wires near walls and away from walking paths.
- Tack down all carpets and area rugs firmly to the floor.
- Arrange your furniture (especially low coffee tables) and other objects so they are not in your way when you walk.
- Make sure your sofas and chairs are a good height for you, so you can get in and out of them easily.



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