

# Reducing Personal Risks of Accidental Falls

In 2002, 1.6 million adults 65 and older were treated in the emergency room for injuries from falls. In addition to environmental risk factors for being injured in an accidental fall, such as poor lighting or loose area rugs, there are individual risk factors that make it more likely that someone will be injured in a fall. For example, people over age 55 are more likely to fall than are younger adults, and women are more likely to fall than men. Other personal risks for falling can be reduced, or have some chance of being reduced, through our own actions.

## **Visual Impairment**

Poor vision can lead to falls. Have regular eye exams and have your vision corrected, if needed. Wear properly fitted, clean glasses. Some eye disorders/diseases can limit your vision or cause blindness, like age-related macular degeneration or cataracts, so take extra precautions with visual impairments to reduce falls.

## **Improper Footwear**

Choose footwear with closed heels and toes, as they are less likely to catch on something that could possibly cause a fall. Make sure the soles of your shoes and slippers are not too slippery and have good traction. Wear shoes while you are inside and outside of the house and avoid going barefoot.

## **Postural Hypotension**

Dizziness or lightheadedness upon standing, or postural hypotension, is caused by a decrease in blood pressure. Experiencing some postural hypotension is normal, but it can be severe enough to cause fainting, especially when standing up after being in bed for several hours. It can also increase in severity with various illnesses and medications. You may wish to use a walker or some heavy, solid object, like a heavy stuffed chair, to hold on to for support.

## **Multiple Diseases**

Some diseases, like Parkinson's, have symptoms that may contribute to accidental falls. Having multiple diseases is a risk factor that we often have no control over. However, we can reduce our risks of getting some major diseases in the future through the proper choices that we make now about nutrition and exercise. It is also possible to reduce complications of some diseases, like diabetes, through nutrition and exercise.

## ☑ Medications

Two-thirds of adults 65 and older use one or more prescription drugs each day, and a quarter of them take three each day. Medications can produce different side effects in different people. Side effects such as blurred vision, unsteadiness, dizziness and postural hypotension are common in blood pressure medicines, muscle relaxants and pain relievers. These side effects increase your risk of falling.

*Multiple medications:* If you are taking more than one medication, side effects may be produced by the interaction of the drugs in your body. *Other drug interactions can happen with an existing medical condition or with certain foods and beverages as well as alcohol.*



You should have medications monitored by your doctor regularly and promptly report any side effects. It is possible that they can adjust the dosage or exact type of medication prescribed to eliminate side effects. Ensure that all medications are labeled correctly. Taking the wrong medicine or missing a dose can be dangerous. **Not taking medication as prescribed kills 125,000 Americans each year.**

**You should also keep a list of all prescription medications, over-the-counter medicines, vitamins and herbal supplements that you take so that your doctor can review this list during each office visit.**

Your doctor receives updated information on medications on a continual basis. So even if you are at your doctor's office for a symptom you think is unrelated to medication, have your doctor review your current medication list while you are there. *Also, a pharmacist can answer questions about prescriptions and over-the-counter medications.*

**Poison Control Hotline 1-800-222-1222**

## ☑ Experiencing a Fall in the Past

Of those aged 65 and over who fall each year, two-thirds of them will fall again within six months. Evidence suggests that the fear of falling is a top concern for older adults. This worry, fear or anxiety may cause a person to restrict their physical activity or be overly cautious about walking. It may also cause older persons to become increasingly dependent or even depressed. If for any reason you feel unstable on your feet, use a walker or a cane.

## ☑ Depression

An estimated 2 million adults 65 and older have a depressive illness. A person who is depressed may experience inattention, be anxious and in a hurry, fatigued, irritable, impatient or have a misperception of their environment; symptoms that can lead to an accidental fall. Other symptoms of depression include ongoing sad or empty feelings, chronic aches and pains, appetite problems, thoughts of death or suicide, memory problems and a lack of energy. If you think you might be depressed, just talk with your doctor about what you are experiencing.

## ☑ Inactivity

More than two-thirds of older adults are not involved in regular physical activity.

Inactivity leads to poor balance and muscle weakness, which are crucial for overall health and fall reduction. Also, a person who does not exercise is more likely to be severely injured if involved in an accidental fall. Muscles become smaller and weaker with lack of exercise, as fat replaces muscle. Weak muscles make us more prone to falls, because they cannot help protect joints or provide necessary strength and balance. *If you exercise regularly, that will increase and maintain your strength, mobility and balance.*

Regular physical activity can also help to prevent or delay certain diseases or disabilities, like diabetes or osteoporosis. Four types of exercises that help older adults gain health benefits include *endurance, flexibility, balance and strength exercises*. Examples include walking, an aerobics or stretching class, chair exercises, yoga, dance, swimming, or even housework and gardening. *A recent study showed that Tai Chi participants improved their balance and cut their risk for falls in half after just a few weeks.*

**Walking is a good exercise and a daily brisk walk can reduce your risk for heart disease by 30 percent. Other walking benefits:**

- It can be done at a pace that you set for yourself.
- It takes good walking shoes, but no other equipment.
- It can be done when you want.
- It strengthens muscles in the lower body.
- It helps build new joint bone and tissue.
- It helps to prevent or slow down osteoporosis by increasing bone density and boosts the immune system.

*Exercise: A Guide by the NIA (free 80-page booklet) 1-800-222-2225*

Check with your doctor before starting any exercise program and always start slowly. Your goal should be to achieve and maintain fitness with moderate exercise. However, if you are not in prime physical condition, violent physical exertion may result in increased risk of heart attack or injury.

**It's never too late. One study of frail older people in their late 80's and 90's showed that after six weeks of a weight training program, muscle strength increased by an average of 180 percent!**



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Senior Wellness Series

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FACT SHEET-07-07

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