

Preventing Falls and Fractures

Personal Changes

Here are some changes to make:

- **Be physically active**
 - Regular physical activity is a first line of defense against falls and fractures.
 - Physical activity strengthens muscles and increases flexibility and endurance.

- **Review medications**
 - Find out about the possible side effects of medications.
 - Some medications might affect coordination or balance, or cause dizziness, confusion, or sleepiness.
 - Some medications do not work well together, adding to the risk of falls.

- **Limit the amount of alcohol**
 - Even a small amount can affect balance and reflexes.

- **Have blood pressure checked when lying and standing**
 - Check blood pressure and pulse after lying down for at least five minutes and again after getting up.
 - If there is a significant drop:
 - Look at need for medication changes.
 - Check for dehydration.
 - Consider using pressure stockings.

- **Get a vision check-up**
 - Have vision tested regularly or if it has changed. Even small changes in sight can make a person less stable.
 - Wear eyeglasses if they are warranted. Keep them clean and check to see that the frames are straight.
 - Be extra cautious while adjusting to new eyeglass prescription.
 - Take off reading glasses or multi-focal lenses when walking.

- **Choose safe footwear**
 - The soles of the feet have nerves that help in judging the position of the body.
 - The feet need to be in touch with the ground, and shoes need to stay securely with the foot at each step.
 - Wear sensible, low-heeled shoes that fit well and support the feet. Shoes should completely surround the feet.
 - Wearing only socks or wearing floppy, backless slippers or shoes without backs can be unsafe.
 - Choose shoes with non-slip soles. Smooth soles can cause slipping on waxed or polished floors.

Home Safety

Well over half of all falls happen at home. Falls at home often happen while a person is doing normal daily activities.

Some tips to help prevent falls outdoors are:

- Use a cane or walker.
- Wear rubber-soled shoes to prevent slipping.
- Walk on grass when sidewalks are slick.
- Put salt or kitty litter on icy sidewalks.

Some ways to help prevent falls indoors are:

- Keep rooms free of clutter, especially on floors.
- Arrange furniture to give plenty of room to walk freely.
- Use plastic or carpet runners.
- Wear low-heeled shoes.
- Do not walk in socks, stockings, or slippers.
- Be sure rugs have skid-proof backs or are tacked to the floor.
- Put non-slip strips on floors and steps.
- Be sure stairs are well lit and have rails on both sides.
- Put grab bars on bathroom walls near tub, shower, and toilet.
- Use a non-skid bath mat in the shower or tub.
- Avoid wet floors and clean up spills right away.
- Use a cane or walker.
- Keep a flashlight next to the bed.
- Use a sturdy stepstool with a handrail and wide steps.
- Add more lights in rooms.
- Buy a cordless phone – keep it close to answer or to call for help in case of a fall.

After a fall the doctor might suggest that an occupational therapist, physical therapist, or nurse visit the home to assess the home's safety and give advice about making changes to prevent falls.

Bone Health

Maintaining the strength of the bones can help prevent fractures.

Having healthy bones will not prevent a fall, but can help prevent hip or other fractures.

Osteoporosis makes bones thin and more likely to break. It is a major reason for fractures in women past menopause. It also affects older men. If bones are fragile, even a minor fall can cause fractures.

Ways to keep bones strong:

Calcium

- Be sure to consume adequate amounts of calcium.
- People over age 50 should consume 1,200mg of calcium daily by eating calcium-rich foods and taking calcium supplements.
- Good dietary sources of calcium include dairy products such as low-fat milk, yogurt, and cheese; orange juice, cereals, and other foods fortified with calcium; dark green, leafy vegetables such as broccoli, collard greens, and bok choy; sardines, salmon with bones, soybeans, tofu, and nuts such as almonds.

Vitamin D

- Be sure to consume adequate amounts of calcium and vitamin D.
- Vitamin D helps the body absorb calcium.
- Exposure to sunlight causes the body to make vitamin D. Many older people do not get enough vitamin D this way.
- As a person grows older, their need for vitamin D increases. People ages 51 to 70 should consume at least 400 international units (IU) of vitamin D daily. People over age 70 should consume at least 600 IU daily.
- Herring, sardines, salmon, tuna, liver, eggs, and fortified milk and foods are good sources of vitamin D.
- Vitamin D supplements may also be needed. Talk with the doctor about how much vitamin D is needed. Taking too much may be harmful.

Physical activity

- Should get a total of at least 30 minutes of physical activity a day.
- Find time for activities like walking, dancing, stair climbing, gardening, and weight lifting.

Bone density

- Talk with the doctor about having a bone density test. This safe, painless test assesses bone health and risk of future fractures.
- Medicare and many private insurers cover this test for eligible people. Women over age 65 and all men over 70 should have a bone density test.

Prescription medications

- Some people will need to take prescription medications to improve bone health.
- These medications can slow bone loss, improve bone density, and lessen the risk of fractures.

Smoking and alcohol

- Quit smoking and limit alcohol use.
- Smoking and heavy alcohol use can decrease bone mass and increase the chance of fractures.

Weight

- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Being underweight increases the risk of bone loss and broken bones.

Adapted from "Falls," U.S. National Library of Medicine. Retrieved from <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/falls.html>. October 2013.