

## Organize Your Home for Safety

- Be sure that you have a sturdy stepladder with handrails available. Never stand on a chair.
- Put commonly used items on lower shelves to avoid having to use a stepladder.
- Improve lighting in and around your home. Replace low-watt light bulbs with the highest wattage that the light fixture allows. Add nightlights in the halls.
- Make sure that a light switch or lamp is within reach of the bed. If that isn't possible, keep a flashlight next to your bed.
- Make sure that a phone is within reach of the bed. If possible, have a phone in every room, or carry a cordless phone around with you

## Step Up to Safety

Steps and stairs are likely areas for falls. Try to make them safer:

- Make sure that a light switch or lamp is within reach of the bed. If that isn't possible, keep a flashlight next to your bed.
- Add bright, non-skid tape to the edge of stairs. Use a different color for the top and bottom steps.
- Take your time on the stairs. Don't try to hurry.
- If you use a cane, use it correctly on the stairs. When going up stairs, lead with your strong leg; then, move the cane and the "bad" leg to the same step. When going down stairs, lead with the cane and the "bad" leg, then, lower the strong leg to the same step.

## What Should I Do If I Fall?

Work out a plan about what to do if you fall.

- Try for a "good fall":
  - Try to twist your body so that you land on your buttocks.
  - If that isn't possible, try spread the force of the fall—try for a "four-point" landing (on both hands and knees) instead of catching your full weight on one hand.
  - Keep your wrists, elbows, and knees bent.
- Stay calm. Try to figure out whether you are hurt.
- Work your way along the floor to the nearest sturdy chair or couch and try to get up. If you're dizzy, stop and rest for a few minutes.
- If you can't get up and someone else is around, call out for help.
- If you are alone, crawl slowly to the phone and call for help. Don't be embarrassed or shy about calling 911.

## CONCLUSION

Falls are a serious risk for seniors. However, falling doesn't have to be part of growing older. You can reduce your chances of falling by taking care of yourself. This includes exercise, getting your eyes checked regularly, wearing the right kind of shoes, and keeping your home free of clutter.

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## Senior Moments

# Preventing Falls in Your Home

Falls are a frequent cause of injuries among seniors. In fact, an estimated one-third of people over the age of 65 fall each year. Serious injuries and permanent disabilities result from about 10% of these falls. Falls are the seventh leading cause of death in seniors – in 1997, nearly 9,000 seniors died because of falls.

Because about half of these falls occur in the home, much attention has been focused on identifying and correcting safety hazards there. However, a recent study by researchers at the Yale School of Medicine shows that we should spend at least as much effort addressing health issues.

This brochure provides answers to some frequently asked questions about falls:

- Why is exercise important?
- Which health issues contribute to falls?
- How can I improve my home's safety?
- What should I do if I fall?

## Why Is Exercise Important?

Exercise increases strength and improves health. Or, put another way, lack of exercise leads to weakness and increases the chances of falling. Consult with a medical professional to select an exercise program that will help you to improve balance and coordination.

Many communities have exercise programs specifically designed for seniors. The programs often include activities such as water aerobics and low-impact aerobics. Another popular option is Tai Chi, which can help to improve balance and coordination.

## What Health Issues Contribute to Falls?

Several studies have found that taking four or more medications a day increases the chances for a fall. Drugs can interact to cause dizziness or decreased alertness. You should review all of your medications, including over-the-counter allergy or cold medications, with your physician or pharmacist.

Software programs such as the Medical Drug Reference by Parsons Technology are also helpful in tracking this information. You enter the medications and the program identifies possible negative interactions.

Dizziness can also be caused by standing up too quickly. Make a habit of getting up slowly, especially if you have high blood pressure or heart trouble. If you feel dizzy, stay seated until your head clears.

Many tripping accidents occur because the person simply didn't see an obstacle. Be sure to have your vision checked regularly.

## How Can I Improve My Home's Safety?

Improving the safety of the home is important. You might be surprised to find many potential problems in your home. Many of these problems can be easily corrected.

### Remove Tripping Hazards

Deal with loose objects that might make you stumble:

- Remove throw rugs or secure the edges to the floor with double-sided carpet tape.
- Remove clutter and things that can be tripped over (books, shoes, papers, pet toys) from halls or walkways.
- If you have a pet, put bells on its collar. The noise will help make the animal's location more obvious. When you are walking, stay aware of the pet's location.
- Make sure that telephone and electric cords do not cross the main walking paths in the room. Instead, run the cords along the edges of the room. Remember that running electric wires under the carpet can be a fire hazard.

## Fix the Furniture

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Check the arrangement of furniture:

- Make sure that there is a clear path through the room.
- If you are likely to use the furniture as a support when standing or rising, make sure that the pieces are sturdy. Move fragile furniture to a place where you are less likely to use it for support.

Sitting on sofas and chairs that are too low can make it difficult when getting up. You may be able to adjust the furniture to a more appropriate height.

1. While sitting on the chair, measure the distance from the floor to the seat of the chair.
2. Measure the distance from the top of the knee to the floor while you are standing.
3. If the two measurements are not the same, try the following methods to adjust the height:
  - Add firm foam pads to the seat of the chair or sofa.
  - Use sturdy bed blocks under the legs of the sofa.

## Cleaning Up the Bathroom

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Many falls occur in the bathroom. To help improve the safety of your bathroom:

- Use rugs with rubberized or non-skid backing. Alternatively, install wall-to-wall carpet that fits snugly and attach it securely on the edges
- Install grab bars or railings around the toilet.

- Have grab bars installed in the tub and in the shower, preferably by a professional. Correct installation is critical to ensure that the grab bars provide proper support.
- Install raised toilet seats. Because standard toilet seats are low, getting up can be difficult.
- Install anti-scald devices on faucets and showerheads.
- Don't lock yourself in the bathroom. It might delay help in getting to you.

## Help Yourself

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Don't wear slippers or socks around the house—they provide little traction and can lead to falls. Thin-soled shoes provide better traction inside. Thick-soled athletic shoes do not provide as good support indoors, but are appropriate for outdoors.

If you are going to be using a walker or cane, make sure that halls and corners have enough room for the walker to go through. If the walker does not fit, review the techniques for maneuvering through the narrow area.

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