

# Healthy Living

Patient Information from the American Chiropractic Association

## PREVENTING FALLS: TIPS FOR SENIORS

**A**s we age, our bodily systems that keep us balanced and standing upright require more awareness. For example, you may not see or hear as well, which can affect your coordination. Nerves that carry information from your brain to your muscles may fray and deteriorate, slowing your reaction time and making it more difficult to move away from oncoming pedestrians or adjust to icy patches on a sidewalk. Normal declines in muscle strength and joint flexibility can hinder your ability to stand, walk and rise from chairs.

Do not let the fear of falling rule your life, however, as many falls and fall-related injuries are preventable. Through scientific studies, researchers have identified a number of modifiable risk factors that increase the likelihood of a fall, including medication side effects, loss of limb sensation, poor eyesight, tripping hazards within the home and lack of physical activity.

The American Chiropractic Association (ACA) recommends the following fall prevention tips:

### Perform a Home Safety Check

At least one-third of all falls involve hazards within the home. Most common is that people trip over objects on the floor. See the Home Safety Checklist (on the next page) and work with a family member or healthcare provider to evaluate your home for potential hazards and minimize your risk of injury.



**Exercise reduces your risk of falls by improving your strength, balance, coordination and flexibility.**

### Begin a Regular Exercise Program

Consider a general exercise program that includes activities such as walking, water workouts or tai chi, which is a gentle exercise that involves slow and graceful dance-like movements. Exercise reduces your risk of falls by improving your strength, balance, coordination and flexibility.

In an experimental study published in the *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, scientists investigated the effectiveness of tai chi in helping reduce the incidence of falls in the elderly. Patients who participated in a 12-week tai chi program, practicing Sun-style tai chi three times a week, significantly increased knee and ankle muscle strength and improved flexibility and mobility compared with a group that did not participate in the exercise program. Tai chi participants were almost twice less likely to experience a fall.

### Review Your Medications

Your risk of falling may increase if you take certain prescription medications. Many medications have

side effects that can affect your brain function and lead to dizziness or lightheadedness. Taking multiple medications magnifies the risk, as does combining prescription drugs with alcohol, over-the-counter allergy or sleeping medications, painkillers or cough suppressants. Medications that can increase your risk of falling include psychotropics, antiarrhythmics, diuretics and sedatives. Also, taking four or more types of medications contributes to increased fall

risk. Ask your prescribing physician to review your medications and reduce your chances of falling by using the lowest effective dosage. Also, discuss the need for walking aids or supports while taking medications that can affect balance.

### Have Your Vision Checked

Reduced vision increases risk of falls. Age-related vision diseases, including cataracts and glaucoma, can alter your depth perception, visual acuity and susceptibility to glare. These limitations hinder your ability to move safely. It is important to have regular check-ups with your ophthalmologist. Also, regularly clean your glasses to improve visibility.

### Preventing Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis makes bones less resistant to stress and more likely to fracture. Caused by hormonal changes, calcium and vitamin D deficiencies and a decrease in physical activity, osteoporosis is a chief cause of fractures in older adults, especially women.

To help limit the effects of osteoporosis, be sure to eat or drink sufficient calcium. Calcium-rich foods include milk, yogurt, cheese, fish and shellfish, broccoli, soybeans, collards and turnip greens, tofu and almonds. In addition, consume sufficient amounts of vitamin D to enhance the absorption of calcium into the bloodstream. Vitamin D is formed naturally in the body after exposure to sunlight, but most adults need a supplement.

Falls don't have to be a part of getting older. Don't let a fear of falling take over your life. You have the power to stay securely on your feet. A physical activity program, lifestyle changes and home improvements may further reduce your risk. Also, know that dehydration contributes to falls, and make sure you drink adequate amounts of water every day.

But if you do find yourself falling, you can reduce your risk of serious injury. If possible, fall forward on your hands or land on your buttocks – but not on your spine. Also, as you fall, protect your head from striking furniture or the floor.

If you live alone and are afraid no one will help you if you fall, ask someone to check on you once a day. Or consider paying for an emergency-monitoring company that responds to your call for help 24 hours a day.

## Home Safety Checklist



### ALL LIVING SPACES

- Remove** throw rugs.
- Secure** carpet edges.
- Remove** low furniture and objects on the floor.
- Reduce** clutter.
- Remove** cords and wires on the floor.
- Check** adequate lighting at night (especially along the path to the bathroom).
- Secure** carpet or treads on stairs.
- Install** handrails on staircases.
- Eliminate** chairs that are too low to sit in and get out of easily.
- Do not** wax your floors – or use nonskid wax.
- Ensure** that the telephone can be reached from the floor.

### BATHROOMS

- Install** grab bars in the bathtub/shower and by the toilet.
- Use** rubber mats in the bathtub/shower.
- Take up** floor mats when you aren't using the bathtub/shower to avoid tripping over them.
- Install** a raised toilet seat.

### OUTDOORS

- Repair** cracked sidewalks.
- Install** handrails on stairs and steps.
- Trim** shrubbery along the pathway to the home.
- Install** adequate lighting by doorways and along walkways leading to doors.



For more information on prevention and wellness, or to find a doctor of chiropractic near you, visit ACA's website at [www.acatoday.org/patients](http://www.acatoday.org/patients) or follow us @Acatoday.

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