



Preventing Falls

Q: Any tips for preventing falls among the elderly?

A: Everybody spoofs the old commercial in which an elder says, "I've fallen and I can't get up." But falls are the top cause of accidents in people over the age of 65, and the main cause of serious injuries and accidental deaths for seniors. One in three people over the age of 65 fall each year. More than 15,000 elders die each year from falls, and 2 million end up in emergency rooms. The most common injury from falls is a hip fracture. One in four people who have a hip fracture die within a year.

Poor eyesight or poor hearing can lead to falls, as can a basic illness, which affects your strength and balance. The side effects of some medicines can cause dizziness. Medicines for depression, sleep problems and high blood pressure often cause falls. Some medicines for diabetes and heart conditions can affect your balance. Have your doctor check all your drugs for correct dosage and possible interactions. Get your eyes checked every year, and see your doctor right away if you feel dizzy, weak or unsteady on your feet; if you feel confused; or if you fall.

To reduce the risk of falls, experts say older people should focus on strength training exercises to keep muscles strong. Exercise programs like yoga and tai chi improve balance.

Because your home can also be a fall-hazard, due to poor lighting, scatter rugs, cluttered furniture - here are some tips to lower your risks:

- Wear shoes with nonskid soles (put away your house slippers).
- Be sure your home is well lit in every room used.
- Place night lights in your bedroom, bathroom, hallways and stairways.
- Remove throw rugs or use carpet tape to fasten them.
- Don't place electric cords across pathways.
- Put grab bars in your bathtub, shower and toilet area.
- Install handrails on both sides of stairways.
- Don't use stools and stepladders. Get help for jobs with climbing.
- Wax your floors with a non-skid wax, or not at all. Put non-skid treads on your stairs, nail down well any stair rugs.
- Repair your sidewalks and walkways so they are smooth and even.
- Anytime you get up from bed, sit on the side of the bed before you stand up, to give your blood pressure time to adjust.
- Have a commode by your bed to avoid a trip to the bathroom at night.

Fall-related medical expenses cost Americans more than \$20 billion annually. Congress has been considering a number of falls prevention bills, but no major education effort has passed. Meanwhile, each week, another 30,000 people over the age of 65 are seriously injured in a fall.