

## Falls Aren't Funny

Brenda Sue Black, Associate Professor  
Shirley Dzikowski, Physical Therapist

Falls in a slapstick comedy routine may be funny by design; in everyday living, however, falls are not funny. In fact, falls are the leading cause of death from injury in people over 65 years old.

Falls are a health risk to everyone, but especially to older men and women. Nearly one out of every three community dwelling older adults falls each year.

A fall affects both physical health and emotional well-being. Fear of falling can cause older adults to limit their physical and social activities. Decreased activity weakens muscles and in turn leads to a loss of confidence in walking.

**What Causes a Fall?** Usually, a combination of risk factors contribute to a fall. But, many of these risk factors could be eliminated or changed significantly.

Risk factors include lack of physical activity, osteoporosis, medications, neurological disorders, hazards in homes and living environments, impaired vision, and lack of knowledge of preventive strategies.

**Fall Prevention** - Studies show that older adults who participated in a fall prevention program had a 20 percent lower rate of falls than persons who did not participate. Improving posture, reducing or adjusting certain medications, and exercising to increase muscle strength also helped reduce falls.

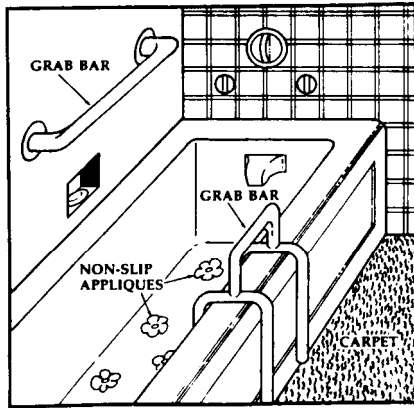
Physical Activity - Increasing physical activity may be one of the best interventions in fall prevention. Appropriate exercise may increase and/or maintain muscle strength needed for proper body alignment, walking, and improved steadiness.

### Reducing Home and Community Hazards

Reduce the likelihood of falling in the home and community by following these suggestions.

- Use a cane, walking stick, or walker to help you maintain balance on uneven or unfamiliar ground or if you sometimes feel dizzy.
- Keep a pail of deicer by the door. Use special caution in walking outdoors on wet and icy pavements.
- Make sure hallways and stairways have enough light and are clear of clutter.
- Firmly attach carpet or abrasive strips to steps.
- Install handrails on both sides of the entire length of stairways.

- Attach grab bars in and out of the tub and shower and near the toilet.



- Use nonskid mats, abrasive strips, or carpet on bathroom surfaces that may be wet.
- Secure rugs and door mats to the floor.
- Keep electrical cords, telephone wires, etc., out of walking paths.
- Arrange furniture to allow for ease of movement where you walk or move about most often.
- Have an accessible telephone, intercom, etc., in each room if you live alone. Arrange for a family member, friend, or neighbor to call you once or twice a day.

- Wear your glasses all the time.
- Repair cracks in sidewalks, loose floorboards on porches, and other hazards to eliminate tripping.
- Wear rubber-soled shoes.
- Check for abrupt changes (greater than 1/2-inch) in floor surfaces. For example, door thresholds may need to have a beveled ramp installed to prevent tripping.
- Close open risers (often found on exterior wooden steps), which are a tripping hazard.
- Avoid using closely related colors together. Instead, use contrasting colors between places like doorways and walls, risers and flat surfaces of steps, etc.
- Use higher wattage lightbulbs where appropriate. Distribute light evenly and avoid using shiny surfaces to help minimize glare.
- Clearly mark (with white or reflecting tape) hazardous changes in floor levels.

-----

#### Follow-up activities:

Refer to the “Active for Life” exercise manual for strengthening exercises appropriate for older adults.

Inventory your home to identify potential hazards for falls.

Assist older members of the community in an inventory of their homes.

#### References:

Age Page, *Preventing Falls and Fractures*, 1991, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Perspectives in Health Promotion and Aging, *Fall Prevention Through Health Promotion*, (6) 1991, National Resource Center on Health Promotion and Aging, AARP, Washington, D.C.

Developing Fall Prevention Program for Older Adults, AARP, 1993, Washington, D.C.

The Do-Able Renewable Home, 1991, AARP, Washington, D.C.

1994: 4M

Programs and activities offered by the West Virginia University Cooperative Extension Service are available to all persons without regard to race, color, sex, disability, religion, age, veteran status, sexual orientation or national origin.

Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, West Virginia University and the United States Department of Agriculture, Cooperating. Director, Cooperative Extension Service, West Virginia University. Published in Furtherance of Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914.