

# Senior Series

*The Ohio  
Department of  
Aging*



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## Preventing Falls

Falls rank among the top five causes of death from unintentional injuries in the United States. An estimated one-third of Americans over age 65 will suffer falls each year. In 1995, there were 7,700 Americans over age 65 who died as a result of falls. Sixty percent of fatal falls involving older Americans occur in the home. However, current research suggests that falls may not be the result of getting older. Studies are underway to identify other risk factors.

### What Can You Do?

The National Center for Injury and Prevention Control (NCIPC) gives the following suggestions to prevent unintentional falls:

1. Exercise regularly to maintain strength, flexibility, mobility, and balance.
2. Review current over-the-counter and prescription medications with your physician periodically.

3. Check your vision regularly.
4. Make your home a safer place in which to live.

### Floors, Rugs, and Runners

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission estimates more than 6,800 people age 65 and older are treated in the emergency room each year for injuries related to rugs and runners. To reduce the risk of injury, purchase rugs with slip-resistant backing or avoid using rugs, mats, or runners. Slip-resistant characteristics can be less effective over time, so replace rugs and mats as needed.

### Extension Cords and Telephone Cords

Try to avoid using extension cords. Cords extended into walk areas may cause someone to trip and fall. Rearrange furniture so that lamps and appliances are near an outlet. If you must use an

extension cord, be sure the cord is on the floor and against a wall. Never place electric cords under carpeting as this creates a fire hazard.

Telephone cords can also cause falls. Be sure telephone cords are not hanging into or across traffic patterns.

## Step Stools Not Chairs

When you need to reach something on a high shelf, what do you do? The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission estimates more than 3,000 people age 65 and older receive emergency room treatment for falls when climbing on chairs instead of step stools. Chairs were made for sitting. They become unstable when used as a substitute ladder or stool.

If purchasing a step stool, select one with a handrail that can be held while standing on the top step. Be sure all screws and braces are tight. Dispose of stools with broken parts. Place the stool on an even surface, open it fully, and place your foot in the center of the step.

## Bathtub and Shower

Remember that tile and porcelain surfaces get slippery when wet or soapy. To avoid falls in the bathroom, use non-skid mats or textured appliques and at least one grab bar in the shower or tub. Grab bars should be attached to a secure wall structure or to the side of the tub. If your balance is unreliable, it may help to sit on a sturdy stool with non-skid tips in the shower or tub.

## Lighting—Bedroom, Stairs, Basement, Garage, Storage Areas, Everywhere

Try to arrange your bedroom so that you can turn on a light before you get out of bed. If this is not possible, use a flashlight, or install night lights or a “glow switch.” Light switches should be at each entrance or exit of a room. If they are not, be sure to use a flashlight. Always turn on lights before walking into a dark area, even if you think you know where everything is located.

Areas of your home that contain sharp tools could make a fall more hazardous. Be sure to have sufficient lighting in basement, garage, and storage areas.

Stairs may have light, but do they have enough light to see the step edges clearly? Can you turn them off and on at the top and bottom of the stairs? Use frosted bulbs, indirect lighting, or lighting fixtures with globes to cut down on glare. Remember that glare from windows can temporarily affect your ability to see. Partially closed shades, curtains, or drapes can be helpful.

## Handrails and Steps

Be sure that handrails and the fixtures that hold them are securely fastened and run from the top to the bottom of the stairs. If the handrail cracks or breaks, replace it immediately. Never use tape as a temporary solution for a broken handrail. Always use handrails when you climb up or down stairs.

Replace any worn or loose stair treads. Firmly attach carpet to all of the steps. Repair any nails sticking out from covering. Never leave items on the stairs. Someone could trip on them.

## Other Concerns

Wear sturdy shoes with laces. Whether you are indoors or outside, use caution when walking on uneven surfaces. Remember that ice, snow, or spills can make surfaces slippery for walking.

## Summary

Falls occur when people lose their balance, can't see in the dark, trip over cords or throw rugs, use furniture that is not sturdy, climb on chairs, slip, or slide. Studies are underway to identify other risk factors that may contribute to falls.

Staying active benefits people of all ages. Greater mobility and balance, stronger bones, and reduced risk of falls from hip fractures are just a few good reasons to remain active throughout your life. Medication reviews with your physician and regular vision checks may help prevent some falls. A home safety check and minor changes may make your home a safer place to live.

## Sources

National Center for Injury and Prevention Control, Fact Sheet: *Falls and Hip Fractures Among the Elderly* (April 1998).

National Safety Council. *Accident Facts* (1998 Edition).

U.S. Product Safety Commission. *Safety For Older Consumers: Home Safety Checklist*. (1998).

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