

# Reducing Your Fall Risk

## Falls can result in serious injury.

Every year in the United States, 1 in 3 people over the age of 65 fall. Most aren't serious, but falls are the leading cause of injury, admission to nursing homes, and injury-related death among older adults. As we age, our physical conditions and abilities change. Older people also take medicines that contribute to balance problems.

With some planning and good medical and home management, most falls and fall-related injuries can be avoided. These strategies can help you avoid falls:

### 1. See your doctor.

The first step in fall-prevention is for your doctor to take a comprehensive look at your environment, your health and your medications. In setting up a fall-prevention plan, your doctor will want to know:

**All the medicines you are taking.** Include prescription and over-the-counter medications and bring them to the doctor appointment so your doctor can review your medications for side effects that affect your fall risk.

**Your fall history.** Include when, where and how you fell as well as instances when you nearly fell but didn't.

**About vision and hearing problems.** These may increase your risk. Tell the doctor about any dizziness, joint pain, numbness or shortness of breath. Your doctor may evaluate your muscle strength, balance and gait.

### 2. Get regular exercise.

After consulting with your physician, start a general exercise program as part of your fall-prevention plan. Activities such as walking, swimming, stationary cycling, water workouts or tai chi can help reduce your risk of falls by improving your strength, balance, coordination and flexibility.

Your doctor may recommend carefully monitored exercise programs or give you a referral to a physical therapist who can devise a custom exercise program aimed at improving your balance, muscle strength and gait. To improve your flexibility, the physical therapist may use techniques such as electrical stimulation, massage or ultrasound. If you have inner ear problems that affect your balance, balance retraining exercises may help.

### **3. Wear sensible shoes.**

Mom was right. High heels, flip-flops, slippers and slick-soled shoes can cause a fall. Instead:

- Buy properly fitting, sturdy shoes with nonskid soles (be sure to measure your feet each time you buy).
- Avoid shoes with extra-thick soles.
- Choose lace-up shoes instead of slip-ons, and keep the laces tied. If you have trouble tying your laces, select footwear with fabric fasteners (Velcro).
- Ladies: the men's department has wider shoes – buy shoes that fit your feet and not the fashion designer's idea of what a woman should wear.
- Use a long-handled shoehorn.

### **4. Remove trip hazards.**

Assess your home — living room, kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, hallways and stairways may be filled trip hazards and clutter. Try these tips:

- Remove boxes, newspapers, electrical cords and phone cords from walkways.
- Move coffee tables, magazine racks and plant stands from high-traffic areas.
- Secure loose rugs with double-faced tape, tacks or a slip-resistant backing.
- Repair loose floorboards and carpeting right away.
- Store clothing, dishes, food and other household necessities within easy reach.
- Clean up spills immediately.
- Use nonskid floor wax.
- Use nonskid mats in your bathtub or shower.

### **5. Light up your living space.**

As we age, our vision changes and you may find more light is better. Keep your home brightly lit to avoid tripping on objects that are hard to see. Don't use bulbs that exceed the wattage rating on lamps and lighting fixtures. Also:

- Place a lamp near your bed and within reach if you get up at night.
- Make clear paths to light switches that aren't near room entrances. Install glow-in-the-dark or illuminated switches.
- Use night lights in bedrooms, bathrooms and hallways and especially stairways.
- Turn on the lights before going up or down stairs.
- Store flashlights in easy-to-find places in case of power outages.

### **6. Use assistive devices.**

A cane or walker can help steady your balance. Also consider:

- Grab bars mounted inside and just outside your shower or bathtub.
- A raised toilet seat with armrests.
- A sturdy shower or tub seat so that you can sit down.
- A hand-held shower nozzle so that you can shower while sitting.
- Handrails on both sides of stairways.
- Nonskid treads on bare steps inside and on hard exterior steps and surfaces.

Other solutions, such as ramps, better sidewalks, and wider doorways, extensive floor repair and other items may require professional help. If you plan to stay in your home for many more years, an investment in safety and fall prevention now may make that possible.