

Preventing falls is about balance— physical, medical, and nutritional

Anyone can fall. But according to Health Canada, seniors fall more often, and the consequences are more serious. More than one in three Canadians over 65 will fall each year. Half will have an injury that reduces their mobility and independence.

Physical changes that occur with aging increase the risk of falling. Muscles lose strength and flexibility. Balance reflexes slow down. Vision is poorer. Health conditions like arthritis, stroke, and Parkinson's disease increase the risk of falling. What's more, some prescription medications, such as drugs to control blood pressure, interfere with balance.

These risk factors are cumulative -- the more risk factors you have, the greater the risk of falling. Recognizing these factors is the first step in preventing falls. The next step is adjusting home and lifestyle to reduce as many risk factors as possible, and stay safe.

Keeping a healthy balance of physical, medical, and nutritional factors in your life will help you to live an active life and prevent falls.

Exercise

Exercise is one of the keys to preventing falls. It maintains your strength, endurance, and bone health. It also contributes to balance. There are many ways to exercise – from dancing or walking to armchair fitness. You can go to a gym, but you can also get your exercise at a shopping mall, a senior centre or just at home. Talk to your health care provider about the best program of exercise for you.

Many seniors enjoy walking their pet as a form of exercise. One caution: be careful around dog leashes, which can cause falls.

Safety aids and supports

Have your vision and hearing checked regularly. Wear your glasses or hearing aid(s). Wear good supportive footwear with closed heels and toes, and of proper size.



Use an aid for walking if you need it. The new Nordic-style walking poles are becoming very popular.

Keep your home well-lit. Make sure stairways have good lighting. Install a night light at the top of the stairs. Keep a flashlight near the bed in case the power goes out.

Don't stand on furniture to reach a shelf. Instead, use a sturdy stepladder. If you have been having balance problems, ask for help. Put items that you use a lot on the lower shelves. It is easy to 'overbalance' and fall if you are lifting something heavy over your head.

Install handrails and grab-bars in bathrooms and stairways. When you carry things up and down the stairs, always keep one hand free so that you can hold on to the handrail.

View all of your safety aids and supports as sources of strength to help you do things independently, not signs of weakness.

Maintaining your balance

Talk to a doctor or pharmacist about the possible side effects of any medicine you take, especially drowsiness or dizziness. Be sure to ask about its effect when combined with other medicine, food or health supplements you take. If you take medicine for blood pressure, ask your doctor or nurse to measure your blood pressure both while sitting and standing. Some people find that their blood pressure may drop when they stand, which can make them dizzy. An adjustment to the dosage of medication may be required.

You can help to prevent morning dizziness by sitting on the edge of the bed for 10 seconds before you get up.

Take good care of your feet. Make sure that any corns, calluses, or long nails are trimmed. Get your feet checked regularly, especially if you have diabetes.

Healthy diet

A healthy diet maintains strength, balance, and resistance to disease. Some people find it helps to eat smaller meals throughout the day rather than the traditional 'three squares'. If you drink alcohol, watch out for its effect on your balance and walking. This goes double if you are also taking medications.

Tips for controlling hazards at home

- In winter, keep steps and walkways clear. Use salt or sand on ice.
- When walking outdoors in winter, put tips on canes and other walking aids that help prevent slipping.
- Wipe up any spills as soon as they happen, especially on ceramic floors.
- Don't leave clutter on the stairs.
- Remember to slow down, even if you are late. In a rush, it is easy to overlook hazards.

About the Author

Compiled by the Seniors' Health Division,
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