

Preventing Falls

Falls are the most common accidents among older people and can cause injuries affecting lifestyle and quality of life. Older people often have medical conditions or take medicines that may increase their risk of having a fall. The chances of having a fall can be reduced by understanding and managing the causes.

As we get older we are more likely to have a fall and a fall is more likely to have serious consequences. Falls can lead to time in hospital or a need for full time care, such as an aged care home. Many things can increase the chances of having a fall.

Age-related changes

Changes that happen to our bodies as we age increase the chances of having a fall. Changes to eyesight and balance, weak muscles, stiff joints and slow reflexes can all make people unsteady on their feet and unable to protect themselves from falling.

Medical conditions

Medical conditions that can increase the chances of having a fall include:

- Low blood pressure
- Stroke
- Parkinson's disease
- Arthritis
- Dizziness
- Diabetes
- Dementia
- Depression
- Incontinence (poor bladder or bowel control)
- Poor eyesight (e.g., cataract, glaucoma)
- Poor nutrition (e.g., not eating well, not drinking enough water).

Short-term illnesses like the 'flu' and surgery can also increase the risk of falling.

Medicines

As we get older we often become more sensitive to the actions and side effects of medicines, including non-prescription and complementary medicines.

The effects of medicines that can increase the chances of having a fall include drowsiness, dizziness, blurred vision and confusion.

Medicines that can increase the risk of falls include:

- Sleeping tablets
- Medicines for anxiety, depression and other mental illness
- Fluid tablets
- Medicines for high blood pressure
- Medicines for epilepsy
- Some medicines for heart disease
- Some pain relievers
- Some anti-allergy medicines
- Some medicines for urinary incontinence
- Some medicines for abdominal cramps.

People have a higher risk of falls when taking four or more different medicines, starting a new medicine or changing the dose of their medicine.

Alcohol also increases the risk of falling and it can react with some medicines to increase the risk even further.

Environmental hazards

There can be many tripping and slipping hazards at home and in public places including:

- Footwear that does not give enough grip or support
- Loose or worn mats
- Uneven paving or walkways
- Slippery floors and surfaces (e.g., bathroom floors, mossy paths)
- No handrails for stairs or toilets
- Poor lighting
- Clutter
- Pets.

Self care

Preventing falls

- Have regular checks with your doctor to review and manage your medical conditions.
- Exercise at a moderate level for at least 30 minutes on all or most days of the week. A physiotherapist or fitness instructor can advise on physical activity for older people that helps improve with flexibility, balance and muscle strength. A physiotherapist can also advise on walking aids.
- Remove and/or avoid tripping hazards and use good lighting. An occupational therapist can advise on equipment to help make homes and household tasks safer.
- Wear supportive, non-slippery footwear. A podiatrist can advise on safe footwear.
- Have your eyesight checked regularly.
- Follow low-risk drinking guidelines for alcohol.

- Eat regular, healthy meals, including plenty of fruit, vegetables and grain foods. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.
- Stand up slowly after lying or sitting. Take care when bending down and make sure you are steady before walking.
- Ask someone for assistance if you feel unstable.
- Make a plan of what to do if you have a fall or other emergency. Consider a personal monitor or alarm system.

Care with Medicines

- Read all medicine labels and instructions and follow directions carefully.
- Read the Consumer Medicine Information leaflets for your medicines. They contain information about a medicine's actions and side effects and how to use it safely.
- Keep a current list of all your medicines, including non-prescription medicines from pharmacies, supermarkets and other shops. This will help your doctor and pharmacist to identify medicine-related problems. A pharmacist can provide you with a list of your medicines or you can use a A MediList and Health Record Card, available from the DVA website.
- Ask a pharmacist or doctor for advice on how to reduce or avoid side effects of your medicines.

Important

After a fall, ask a doctor to check for injuries and to investigate possible causes of the fall.

To reduce the chances of having a fall:

- Manage your medicines and medical conditions carefully
 - Understand the effects of your medicines
 - Move carefully – don't rush
 - Exercise regularly
 - Wear supportive shoes
 - Keep your home environment safe
 - Ask for help if you feel unsteady
 - Limit alcohol intake.
- Ask a pharmacist or doctor before drinking alcohol while taking medicines.
 - Do not use other people's medicine. It could have a different effect on you.
 - Start taking new medicines when other people are around to help, in case side effects occur.
 - Consider having tablets packed into a medicines organiser, such as a weekly tablet box or blister pack (e.g., Websterpak), by a pharmacist.
 - Consider having a pharmacist visit you at home for a Home Medicines Review (HMR) to help identify medicine-related problems. An HMR can be arranged through your local doctor.

For more information

A doctor

Listed under 'Medical Practitioners' in the yellow pages of the phone book.

A physiotherapist, occupational therapist and/or a podiatrist

Contact your nearest public hospital or Community Health Centre, or look in the yellow pages of the phone book.

Independent Living Centres Australia

Phone: 1300 885 886

Website: www.ilcaustralia.org

The Aged Care Information Line

Phone: 1800 500 853

Website: www.agedcareaustralia.gov.au

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthinsite.gov.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: www.nps.org.au

The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts.

Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

Related fact cards

- » *Alcohol*
- » *Bladder and Urine Control*
- » *Exercises for Flexibility*
- » *Osteoarthritis*
- » *Osteoporosis*
- » *Rheumatoid Arthritis*
- » *Sleeping Problems*
- » *Vision Impairment*
- » *Wise Use of Medicines (website only – ask your pharmacist)*

Your Self Care Pharmacy: