

## Family Living Focus

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### Keep on Your Toes to Prevent Falls

Sometimes we get busy or distracted and don't think about what we are doing to put ourselves at risk. We may laugh at the pratfalls in a slapstick comedy, but a fall can be a very serious matter, especially as we get

older.

Falls in homes can occur for many reasons. Some are related to the features of the house, its furnishings, or the activities in which we engage. Some are related to our own bodies, our posture, gait, visual abilities, diseases, how well our shoes fit,

or the effect of medications we are taking. In most cases, both types of factors play a role in why someone has fallen.

If you recognize the limitations placed on you by your body, you can begin to identify places where a fall might occur and look for solutions for preventing it. After talking to a group at a senior day-care center on fall injury prevention, one woman told me that these methods are things that we should know already, but it is good to be reminded of them.

Let's start by considering problems related to vision. One obvious solution is good lighting. Seventy-five watt bulbs are recommended in all rooms, hallways, and stairways. But keep in

mind that some fixtures tax a maximum of 60 watts. Because of the fire hazard, the maximum wattage should never be exceeded. Night lights are inexpensive and are helpful in lighting hallways and other areas at night.

You should be able to turn on a light when entering a room and turn it off when leaving a room. If light switches are not present at each doorway, consider installing motion activated or photoelectric lights. Allow times for your eyes to adjust to the different light level when going from light and dark areas. Within the reach of your bed, have a place to keep your eyeglasses and a flashlight.

Too much light can create a

problem with glare, especially for person with cataracts. Glare from light bulbs can be dealt with by adding or changing a lampshade. For ceiling lights, a dimmer switch will allow you to adjust the lighting level to what you need. Glare from bright sunlight coming through the windows can be controlled with window treatments.

Older persons require three times as much contrast for the detection of objects in the environment. Contrast in light and dark surfaces can be especially important at stairways. If you cannot tell when you've reached the last step you may be susceptible to falling. A baseboard of a contrasting color will help if the floor and wall surfaces blend into one another because they are very close to the same color. Painting the top riser or the bottom step a different color will also make it more distinguishable.

If maintaining balance is a problem what can you do? For

stairways, a solid, secure handrail is essential. Better yet, a handrail on each side of the stairway. If one arm is weak, the handrail on each side is helpful because whether going up or down, you can use the stronger arm to grasp the railing.

Grab bars at the bathtub, shower, or toilet are essential. Towel bars are not grab bars. A properly installed grab bar is attached to the studs in the wall and will withstand much more of a pull. Keep soap, shampoo, and a towel in a place where you don't have to bend to reach them. Also use a slip resistant mat in the tub and on the bathroom floor.

Solid, stable furniture that will not tip over when leaned on can also be important for support when moving through a room. Never use a chair to climb on. Instead, if necessary to reach something, use a step-stool with a handrail or a sturdy ladder.

If dealing with mobility problems, weak leg strength, or low foot swing, avoid deep pile carpeting. Throw rugs should have non-skid backing. Deep or low chairs also should be avoided. The bed should be at a good height for ease of movement on or off it.

Keep electrical and telephone cords out of the pathways. Fans and heaters should be kept out of traffic paths to avoid tripping.

These are just a few suggestions of how to recognize and deal with various potentially hazardous situations around the house. No matter what your age or ability, these suggestions can make your home a safer and more enjoyable place to live.

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