



YOUR GUIDE TO FALL PREVENTION

You can stop a fall **before** it happens



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Introduction

Falling is a serious problem for older adults. Did you know that:

- Every year, one in three older adults fall
- 90 per cent of hip fractures are due to a fall
- Falls are the major cause of fatal injuries for those aged 75 and over
- 40 per cent of nursing home admissions are fall-related

Falls usually have more than one cause. For example, someone who falls on a slippery floor may have weak leg muscles and, at the same time, experience dizziness as a side effect of medication.

This guide to fall prevention reviews the causes of falls and makes recommendations to help prevent falls, injuries and loss of independence.

Use this guide on your own or with the help of health care professionals. The checklists in each section will help make sure you are doing all you can to help prevent a fall.

More information about falls, injury prevention and healthy aging can be found at:
york.ca/healthyaging

Exercise and supportive relationships

Lack of physical activity, chronic diseases such as diabetes, arthritis or abnormal blood pressure, and changes associated with normal aging can lead to walking and balance difficulties and loss of mobility and independence. Regular physical activity and exercise will increase muscle strength, improve co-ordination, help prevent falls and maintain your independence.

Supportive relationships have a positive effect on health.

“People who remain actively engaged in life and connected to those around them, are generally happier, in better physical and mental health, and more empowered to cope with life transitions” (Public Health Agency of Canada).

- Participate in flexibility activities, such as yoga or gardening
- Practice strength and balance activities, such as climbing stairs, wall push-ups, or Tai Chi
- Stay connected with family and friends regularly



Recommendations

- Talk to your doctor before you start an exercise program
- Set meaningful goals: think about what you would like to do and plan time to do it
- Discover exercise and activity programs for older adults in your area
- Make sure the exercises you choose are helpful to you
- Make your activities as enjoyable as possible. Find a buddy!
- Avoid sudden changes in position
- Avoid getting up quickly after stooping or bending down
- Tell your doctor about any changes in your balance
- Schedule visits with family and friends
- Participate in religious groups, craft groups or other organizations

For copies of the Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines, contact:
Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology,
1-877-651-3755

For more information about physical activity, visit: york.ca/physicalactivity

Medication management

Older adults are at an increased risk for falls and fall-related injuries if:

- Taking four or more medications daily, prescribed and/or over-the-counter
- Taking medications to help with sleep or to calm nerves, such as sedatives
- Taking heart, blood thinner or blood pressure medications

Increased risk may be caused by a greater sensitivity to drug side effects, interactions between medications and reduced metabolism and slow medication clearance from the body.

Medications both prescribed and over-the-counter that contribute to the risk of falls include:

- Pain relief
- Muscle relaxants
- Antidepressants
- Diuretics
- Anti-allergy
- Anti-vomiting
- Incontinence
- Eye ointments, gels and drops

Some of the most common drug side effects that might increase fall risk include: drowsiness, confusion, postural hypotension, dizziness or lightheadedness, blurred vision and altered gait and balance.

Recommendations

- Review **all** of your medications with your doctor and/or pharmacist as a **formal annual review** or as often as needed
- Tell your doctor if your medication makes you dizzy or lightheaded
- Take medications correctly as indicated. Use a medication organizer
- Keep a list of all your medications with you at all times
- Use one pharmacy to have all of your prescriptions filled
- Keep medication in its original bottle and do not reuse the bottle
- Return all expired medications to your pharmacist
- Never share your medication or take someone else's medication
- Avoid drinking alcohol with your medication
- Consider alternatives if you take medications to help you sleep. Try relaxation exercises, reading or soft music

Consult with your doctor or pharmacist if you are taking over-the-counter medications including vitamins, herbal remedies and supplements. The pharmacist may make recommendations to your doctor to address side effects and the risk for falls.

Assistive devices

Assistive devices like canes, walkers, handrails and grab bars help prevent falls while hip protectors reduce the risk of injury. We encourage individuals with balance and mobility problems to use assistive devices for daily activities.

Make sure a trained professional properly fits **all** of your assistive devices for your size and condition.

Using a cane

Make sure you get a cane with the correct height for your size. Turn the cane upside down with the handle on the floor. Stand with your arms at your sides. The tip of the cane should be at the level of your wrist.

To adjust a wooden cane, turn the cane upside down and mark it where it is level with your wrist. Remove the rubber tip. Cut the cane ½ inch shorter than where you marked it. Replace the rubber tip.

To adjust an aluminum cane, check the manufacturer's instructions.



Recommendations for using a cane

- Hold your cane on your stronger side, opposite to your weak or painful leg
- Most people move their cane and opposite leg together
- To go up the stairs:
 - Take the first step with your strong leg
 - Then move the cane and your weak leg onto the same step
 - Continue in this way
- To go down the stairs:
 - Take the first step down with your cane and your weak leg
 - Then lower your strong leg to the same step
 - Continue in this way

Remember to replace worn rubber tips on your cane and don't forget to attach a new ice pick in the winter.

Assistive devices (continued)

Using a walker

Check the manufacturer's instruction on how to adjust a walker to your height. When properly adjusted, stand between the two handles and practice using and locking the hand brakes. Once you are confident stopping the walker, try rolling the walker gently forward. Practice on level ground, in an uncrowded area.

Using hip protectors

Hip protectors are either lightweight belts or undergarments with protective padding/shields along the hip bone. They are designed to protect those who wear them from fractures if the wearer falls. Ask your health care professional for more information.



Sitting down on the walker

- Firmly lock the brakes on the handles
- Slowly turn around
- As you turn, move your left-hand to the right-hand handle grip
- When you are entirely turned around, place your right-hand on the former left-hand handle grip
- Keep hands on both handle grips as you slowly sit down

Standing up from a bed or chair

- Move the walker so that it is in front of you, or have someone else do this for you
- Firmly lock the brakes on the handles
- Push up from the bed or chair but don't pull on the walker, it could tip over
- Once you are standing and balanced, unlock the brakes before you start walking

Sitting down on a bed or chair

- Walk to the chair or bed and turn around using the walker
- Back-up to the edge of the chair or bed until the back of your legs touch the edge of the chair or bed
- Firmly lock the brakes on the handles
- Chair:** Reach for the arms of the chair for support and sit down
- Bed:** Reach for the bed's surface, steady yourself and sit down

Assistive devices (continued)

Bath and toilet

If getting into and out of tubs, or getting on or up from toilets is difficult, there are a number of products available that can help.



Recommendations

- Install non-slip tape or anti-slip porcelain or enamel tub treatment on the floor of your tub
- Install at least two grab bars in the tub area
- If getting into or out of the tub is difficult, consider buying a bath bench and a hand-held shower head or change to a walk-in shower
- If sitting on or getting up from the toilet is difficult, consider buying a higher profile toilet or raised toilet seat. Install a grab bar or supportive frame around the toilet

If needed, call your **Community Care Access Centre (CCAC)** to find out if they can help with bathing or other activities of daily living.

Hardware stores, department stores, medical equipment stores, drug stores and specialty stores all have useful devices to make daily activities easier and safer.



Healthy eating and nutrition

A healthy diet is essential for maintaining optimal health. The healthier you are, the less you are at risk of falling.

Follow Canada's Food Guide and enjoy a variety of foods from the four food groups each day: vegetables and fruit, grain products, milk and alternatives, and meat and alternatives.



Recommendations

- Eat regularly: Have three meals a day and if you are hungry, add a small snack in-between meals
- Enjoy a variety of calcium-rich foods in your diet every day such as: milk, fortified soy beverage, yogurt, cheese, canned salmon, sardines or dark green vegetables
- Speak to your health care professional about taking vitamin D and calcium supplements to promote bone health
- Eat more fibre-rich foods to prevent constipation
- Drink plenty of fluids throughout the day to prevent dehydration and dizziness
- Limit sodium (salt) to prevent water retention and high blood pressure
- Take time to eat with family and friends

For more information on nutrition, speak with a Registered Dietitian for free at:

Eat Right Ontario

1-877-510-5102

eatrightontario.ca

To assess your eating habits, fill out the short nutra-eSCREEN survey at:

nutritionscreen.ca/escreen

Health checks

It's important to have a complete physical examination at least once a year. Have your vision, hearing and bone density checked regularly. Be sure to notify your doctor if you have a fall.

Normal changes with aging

As you get older, there are many normal changes. You may notice changes in:

- Vision
- Hearing
- Balance
- Muscle strength and flexibility

Changes that come with aging may be subtle. You may not even notice changes in your physical abilities, however, activities that were once effortless such as climbing the stairs, reaching up or getting into or out of the tub, may now feel difficult or tiring. If you notice that some physical activities feel like more of a challenge, take your time and know your limits.

Health conditions such as diabetes, arthritis, neurological changes or recent surgery may further increase your risk of falls and injuries. Make sure you consult with your doctor if you experience any health changes.

Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis is characterized by loss of bone tissue and low bone mass. When bones lose tissue, holes develop in these bones and they become weaker and more brittle. Bones with low bone mass are more easily broken.

The good news is osteoporosis is preventable.

Recommendations

- Get regular Bone Mineral Density tests
- Have regular check-ups with your doctor and routine health screenings
- Use medication safely
- Eat well
- Be physically active
- Wear supportive footwear
- Use walking aids correctly
- Complete the **Home safety checklist** starting on page 12



Hazards at home: Indoors and outdoors

Nearly half of falls occur in or around the home. Poor lighting, unsafe footwear and icy sidewalks are just a few of the environmental hazards that cause people to fall.



Recommendations

- Identify unsafe areas inside and outside your home
- Start today to make changes to reduce hazards at home
- Report hazards outside your home to the proper authorities:
 - Contact the owner/manager in an apartment building, store or restaurant
 - Contact the mall authority in a shopping mall
 - Contact your local municipality if the problem is in a public area

Falls are preventable. Begin to identify hazards at home, indoors and outdoors by completing the **Home safety checklist** starting on page 12.

Home safety checklist

Mark **Yes** or **No** to the questions below. Your risk of falling increases with the number of hazards identified as **No**. After you answer, read the **recommendations** on how to reduce your chance of falling.

Exercise:

Do you exercise regularly? For example, walk, swim, do aqua fitness, yoga, Tai Chi, strengthening exercises?

Yes No



Recommendations

- Be active every day, in as many ways as you can
- Think of movement as an opportunity not an inconvenience
- Contact your health care professional for practical ways to improve your balance and be steadier on your feet

According to the Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines, to achieve health benefits and improve functional abilities, adults 65 years or older should accumulate **at least 150 minutes** of moderate-to-vigorous intensity aerobic physical activity per week, in bouts of 10 minutes or more.



Home safety checklist (continued)

Bedroom safety:

Can you turn on a light before you get out of bed?

- Yes No

Can you easily get out of bed?

- Yes No

Do you have a telephone by your bed?

- Yes No

If you use walking aids, are they easy to reach before you get out of bed?

- Yes No



Recommendations

- Adjust your bed so that it is at a height easy for you to get on and off
- For better support, try a firm mattress
- Get out of bed slowly: roll to your side, then sit up before you stand
- If you feel dizzy after you lie down or sit up, wiggle your feet for a few minutes and wait for the dizziness to go away before you stand up
- If you have difficulty getting on or off your bed, talk to a health care professional as there are strategies and/or equipment that may be helpful
- Have a light within reach of your bed. Consider a touch lamp or night light
- Add additional night lights along the hall or path to the bathroom
- Keep a flashlight with extra batteries next to your bed
- Keep the floors clear: Loose mats, throw rugs, clothing, newspapers or other items can cause a fall
- Secure loose telephone, electrical and computer cords. They may need to be taped down
- If you wear glasses, make sure they are easy to reach as you get out of bed

Home safety checklist (continued)

Bathroom safety:

Do you use non-slip floor mats in your bathroom and bathtub and/or shower?

- Yes No

Are the soaps, shampoos and towels within easy reach so that you don't have to bend or reach too far?

- Yes No

Do you have handrails or grab bars in the bathtub/shower?

- Yes No

Are you able to walk directly into the shower without stepping over a raised edge?

- Yes No

In your bathtub, do you use a bath seat?

- Yes No

In your bathtub, do you use a hand-held shower?

- Yes No

If needed, do you ask for help with bathing?

- Yes No

Do you use a raised toilet seat?

- Yes No

Is there a grab bar or supportive frame located close to the toilet seat?

- Yes No

Recommendations

- Take extra care when the floor is wet. Wet areas are more likely to be slippery and dangerous
- Install non-slip flooring in your bathroom. For showers and baths, use painted or self-adhesive non-slip strips
- Install and use grab bars around the bathtub, toilet and shower area
- Install a raised toilet seat to make getting on and off the toilet easier. Consider a lower or higher profile toilet
- Use a qualified professional for installations



Occupational therapists can advise you on equipment and changes to your bathroom that will improve your safety and independence. Your **Community Care Access Centre (CCAC)** can also help.

Home safety checklist (continued)

Stair safety:

Are you able to see the edges of steps clearly?

- Yes No

Are stairways well lit?

- Yes No

Are there light switches at the top and bottom of the stairs?

- Yes No

Do your stairs have adhesive tread or carpet?

- Yes No

Are your stairs/steps easy to climb?

- Yes No

Do you have sturdy handrails?

- Yes No

Are your stairways free of clutter?

- Yes No

Recommendations

- Install extra lighting or increase wattage in stairways to remove shadows
- Install a two-way light switch at the top and bottom of the stairs
- Place brightly coloured strips along the edges of stairs to define edges
- Add adhesive stair treads or carpet runner on the steps for traction
- Make sure there is a contrasting colour between the floor and the last step
- Ensure there are handrails on at least one side of all stairways and ideally on **both** sides
- Use the handrails for stability
- Remove clutter or reorganize items in areas near the stairs
- Walk slowly up and down the stairs with the lights on
- Have more able-bodied friends or family carry heavy or large items up or down the stairs



Home safety checklist (continued)

Floor safety:

Do your floor coverings lie flat without curled edges or wrinkles?

- Yes No

Do loose mats or rugs have a non-slip backing?

- Yes No

Are your floors free of clutter?

- Yes No

Are all telephone, electrical and computer cords taped down and away from walkways?

- Yes No

Are your floor surfaces non-slip?

- Yes No

Recommendations

- Remove clutter on floors
- Remove all loose mats
- Use carpet or unglazed tiles and surfaces that are much less slippery than polished floors or shiny tiles
- Check to make sure that carpets are in good repair. Uneven, torn and curled up carpet edges can cause trips and falls
- Use non-slip products, available at hardware stores, to make slippery floors less slippery
- Wipe up spills immediately and make sure floor surfaces are dry. Most floor surfaces are slippery when wet
- Run cords and wires behind furnishings and rearrange items to areas near an outlet



Home safety checklist (continued)

Kitchen safety:

Can you easily reach kitchen items without climbing, bending or losing your balance?

Yes No

Are your work areas well lit?

Yes No

Do you clean up spills immediately?

Yes No

Are your work areas clear of clutter?

Yes No

Recommendations

- Make sure counter space is cleared of clutter
- Use the kitchen table if additional work space is needed
- Move frequently used items to within easy reach
- Avoid standing on a stool or chair by moving items to lower shelves
- If you have to use a step stool, make sure it is sturdy, broad based, with non-slip feet and in good condition
- Clean up spills immediately
- Add counter lightings and additional overhead lighting
- Remove pets from the kitchen while cooking



Home safety checklist (continued)



Living room safety:

Can you get out of your favourite chair or sofa easily?

- Yes No

Do chairs have armrests and are they at a correct and comfortable height?

- Yes No

Is all of your furniture sturdy?

- Yes No

Are low tables removed from the middle of the living room?

- Yes No

Is your furniture placed so that you don't have to stretch or lean too far to open your windows?

- Yes No

Are all telephone, electrical and computer cords taped down and away from walkways?

- Yes No

Are your floors/walkways clear and free of clutter?

- Yes No

Recommendations

- Use higher chairs and chairs with solid armrests because they are easier to get in and out of
- Repair or replace broken chairs or tables
- Remove excess furniture that prevents you from moving around the room easily. Consider donating items that you no longer use
- Keep floors and pathways clear. Remove loose mats, throw rugs, newspaper or other clutter
- Apply non-slip backing or secure floor coverings. Use double-sided tape or a rug pad to secure the rug to the floor
- Never rush to answer the telephone or door
- Keep telephone, electrical and computer cords clear of walkways. Run cords behind furnishings and rearrange items to areas near an outlet
- Consider purchasing a cordless phone with additional handsets to have throughout your home

Home safety checklist (continued)

Lighting safety:

Are your lights bright enough for you to see well?

Yes No

Are inside stairs and outside steps well-lit?

Yes No

Are light switches near doorways easy to reach?

Yes No

Can you easily turn on a light from your bed?

Yes No

Is there good lighting where you keep your medications?

yes no

Recommendations

- Install extra lights or lamps in dark areas
- Use the highest wattage light bulbs recommended for your light fixtures, especially in passageways and stairways
- Use night lights to light the hall or path to the bathroom
- Install night lights in the bathroom
- Allow time for your eyes to adjust when walking from dark to light areas and from light to dark areas
- Rearrange furnishings to allow quick and easy access to wall switches
- Consider installing movement-activated lights in hallways or photoelectric or light-activated lights which turn on automatically when it gets dark



Home safety checklist (continued)

Outside area safety:

Are your steps in good repair and have no damaged or broken steps?

- Yes No

Are your steps easy to climb?

- Yes No

Are your steps and thresholds clearly marked to indicate a change in height?

- Yes No

Do the edges of your steps have adhesive, non-slip strips?

- Yes No

Do your steps have sturdy, easy to grip handrails?

- Yes No

Are entrances, paths and walkways well-lit at night?

- Yes No

Is your garden free of hazards such as tools and hoses?

- Yes No

Is your garage floor free from grease and/or oil?

- Yes No

Are the public areas around your house, such as the sidewalk, driveway or path, in good repair?

- Yes No

Recommendations

- Make sure all outside steps are easy to see. Paint the front edge of the steps with a contrasting colour or apply contrasting non-slip strips
- Check for uneven or broken paths and sidewalks and have them repaired. Contact your local municipality if it is a sidewalk or driveway end
- Keep paths and sidewalks free of leaves and moss
- Install an outdoor light fixture such as a sensor light
- Use a hose reel to store your garden hose
- Store garden tools in a safe place
- Avoid the use of ladders as many serious and even fatal falls result from ladder use
- Walk carefully near pets or small animals as their movements can be unpredictable
- Take extra care in wet or icy conditions

During the winter months, be sure to use snow melter or sprinkle grit or non-clumping kitty litter on icy or slippery surfaces. Have snow and ice removed by a more able-bodied neighbour, friend or family member or service provider.

Home safety checklist (continued)

Personal habits:

I take my time when doing things.

- Yes No

I remove my reading glasses when I use the stairs.

- Yes No

I always wear well-fitted shoes or slippers with low heels and non-slip soles.

- Yes No

I do not wear clothing that I might trip on or step on such as long dresses, skirts, long house coats or loose pants.

- Yes No

If I get up at night, I always turn on a light.

- Yes No

I generally store things at lower levels and within easy reach.

- Yes No

I avoid using a ladder or a step stool and ask someone to reach high objects for me.

- Yes No

I live alone and use a Personal Emergency Response Calling Service or I team up with a neighbour, family member or friend for a daily phone call.

- Yes No

Recommendations

- Ensure your shoes are in good repair, fit properly, and have non-slip soles
- Avoid wearing:
 - Socks without shoes
 - Loose fitting slippers
 - Shoes with slippery soles
 - High heels and flip flops
 - Shoes with pointed toes
- Make sure dresses, skirts, pants, nightwear and all other clothing is short enough to avoid tripping or slipping
- Sit down when dressing and don't stand on one leg when putting pants on
- Replace or repair walking aids such as canes and walkers that feel unsteady
- Be aware of where your pets are located so that you don't fall over your cat or dog

I avoid carrying large objects up or down the stairs.

- Yes No

I always use the handrails when using the stairs.

- Yes No

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Falls are preventable

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