NOTES

Your doctor or therapist has given you this patient education handout to further explain or remind you about an issue related to your health. This handout is a general guide only. If you have specific questions, discuss them with your doctor or therapist.

How to Prevent Disabling Falls

Household items, like throw rugs, dim lights and stacks of magazines rarely scream danger. Yet they can cause an older adult to take a life-threatening tumble.

Falls are the leading cause of injury and death among people 65 and older. Although you may have yet to fall, chances are some of your friends have already been injured this way. In fact, almost 33 percent of people 65 and older fall each year.

Falls can often cause permanent disability—especially in older women. Because of lost bone density from osteoporosis, older women can easily break their hips during a tumble.

In addition to damage caused by a fall, just the fear of falling can be damaging in itself, so much so that 20 percent of older people fear falling enough to limit their activities of daily living, diminishing their quality of life.

As you age, normal alterations in vision, gait, hearing and cognition increase the chance of falls.

You may be at risk if you are in any of the following risk categories:

- Over 65 years old
- Thin, female, or of Caucasian or Oriental descent
- Had prior stroke, or now have early-onset menopause, osteoporosis, a foot disorder, Parkinson's, Alzheimer's or a family history of falls
- On a low calcium diet, are a smoker or drink an excessive amount of alcohol
- Don't exercise, have low blood pressure or sway when you walk.

But falling doesn't have to be a natural consequence of aging; tumbles can be prevented with lifestyle changes and some simple home modifications.

Follow these guidelines to fall-proof your lifestyle:

- Exercise regularly. Lack of exercise leads to weakness and increases your chance of falling.

Exercises that improve balance, such as Tai Chi, are most helpful. But be sure to consult your doctor before starting any program.

- Have your vision checked regularly. You may be using an old prescription or have glaucoma or cataracts that restrict your vision.
- Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about the side effects of your medications, even over-the-counter meds. As you age, some medicines—and certain combinations of medicines—can make you even more drowsy or dizzier than before.
- Limit your alcohol intake.
- Be cautious when getting up from eating or sleeping.
- Use a cane or walker for balance control; take your time on steps and curbs.
- Avoid icy patches in the winter. If the weather report predicts ice, snow or rain, don't go out alone, or consider staying in.

To prevent tumbles at home:

- Clear pathways and hallways of clutter and electrical cords.
- Tack down carpets and rugs, or buy rugs with nonskid backing.
- Keep stairs and hallways brightly lit; use sturdy handrails when walking down steps and affix no-slip treds to stairs.
- Re-arrange furniture to provide plenty of walking room, use chairs with strong backs and tables with four sturdy legs. Make sure chairs and couches aren't too low to the ground.

The lower the furniture, the more difficult it is to go from a seated to standing position, and vice versa.

- In the bathroom, use a raised seat and safety rails for the toilet, and install handrails in the bathtub.
- Use slip-resistant strips or a rubber mat in the tub. A shower seat also could help.
- Store items in waist-high cabinets and shelves in the kitchen; avoid reaching for items that are placed too high to reduce the risk of losing your balance and falling while reaching.
- Put a rubber mat in front of the sink so you don't slip on spilled water.

Most importantly, always remember to exercise good judgment. And making these simple changes will give you the peace of mind to keep living your life. ■

Information adapted from Preventing Falls in Seniors, *accessed via www.cdc.gov, Fall Prevention, accessed via www.agenet.com and* Tips for Preventing Falls, *accessed via www.jeffersonhealth.org.*

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