Avoiding slips, trips and broken hips

Information for older people on how to avoid accidental falls in the home
People are living longer, and have a right to expect the highest possible quality of life. But it's a sad fact that falls among older people are very common. And so many of these falls can easily be prevented.

Here are some simple steps to follow:

**Help yourself be safer**

**Keep physically active**

Falls can be due to weak muscles and poor balance. You can improve these by:

- Regular physical activity, such as brisk walking, light gardening, housework, dancing and keep fit classes.
- Regular gentle exercise and massage can relieve arthritic pain and swelling.
- T'ai Chi has been shown to improve balance and reduce risk of falls but check that the teacher is experienced in working with older people.

Remember, if you are new to physical activity
- speak to your GP first
- start gently, progress slowly and listen to your body.

Restricting your activity because of a past fall or fear of a fall may increase the chances of another fall.

- Many of the problems after a fall (hypothermia, pneumonia) are due to the 'long lie' when somebody cannot get up even if they have not injured themselves. Try using furniture to help you get up if you can not get someone to help you.
**Take fewer risks in your routine**

When you get out of bed, or off a chair after a long sit, it is a good idea to do it in slow stages. A sudden drop in blood pressure often leads to light-headedness when you stand quickly. Try tensing your arms and legs a few times before you stand as this often helps. Consider raising the head of the bed with a wedge pillow.

If you need to go to the toilet in the night, turn on a light rather than use a torch. If you need to stoop, hold onto something secure.

**Be aware of changes in your health**

- If you are feeling unwell, let a friend or neighbour know.
- Take care if you have spine and neck arthritis. This can lead to dizziness if you lean your head back or turn your head too quickly.

- Have regular eye check-ups and foot care. If you are entitled to a free NHS eye check, see if a home visit can be arranged.
- If you are on more than four medications, ask your GP to review them on a regular basis – let your GP know if your pills make you dizzy.
- Never mix alcohol with medications as the interaction can cause dizziness and loss of balance.
- Ask your GP about getting a 'flu jab. Illnesses such as influenza can, in the short term, make you far more prone to falling.
Healthy eating

Ensure that your diet contains ample quantities of calcium and that you are getting enough vitamin D to keep your bones strong and reduce the risk of a fracture. Milk, cheese and yoghurt are sources of calcium but try to choose lower fat versions where possible.

Vitamin D can only be found in a limited number of foods such as oily fish e.g. sardines and tuna, and in meat. It is added to other foods such as most fat spreads and breakfast cereals. It is also produced by the action of sunlight on the skin but if you do not go out very much you may still need to take supplements. Your GP or pharmacist will advise.

 Clothes, shoes and glasses

- Avoid wearing loose-fitting or open-backed slippers, sandals, shoes with heels, flared trousers, trailing nightdresses or other footwear or clothing that might cause you to slip or trip. Wear thin-soled or flat shoes or ones with an in-built heel, rather than trainer type shoes. Avoid walking in socks or tights on slippery floors.

- Separate glasses for reading and distance are safer than bifocals or vari-focals. You may be able to receive financial help with buying your glasses, ask your optician for advice.

- Consider buying hip protector underwear that reduces the risk of a hip fracture as a result of a fall. They are washable and not visible under clothing and should be worn day and night. Ask your GP where they can be obtained.
Precautions in and around the home

Small changes in your home can help reduce accidents:

- fitting a letterbox cage can help you avoid stooping to pick up letters
- using 100W light bulbs in the kitchen and stairways will make it easier to see any potential hazards
- buying long-life bulbs saves changing them so often and saves energy and money in the long-run
- highlighting the outer edge of steps with non-slip white paint will make them more visible
- try to avoid having trailing wires and clutter in walking areas and on stairs
- using non-slip mats under rugs, in the kitchen, inside and next to the bath and on stair landings will help you to avoid trips
- handrails by the toilet, bath and stairs will help you balance and can make getting around easier
- if you remove or repair frayed carpet edges this will make them safer and you will be less likely to trip over them
- think about storing frequently used items in areas that avoid you having to over stretch or stoop

- see if you can get help for chores such as changing curtains or light bulbs
- using a sturdy set of non-slip steps with a safety chain and handrail is safer than standing on a chair
- if you lean or hold onto easily moveable furniture removing any casters will make them more stable
- spreading salty sand on wet or icy steps will make them less slippery
- by always mopping up spills immediately you will reduce the risk of slipping for you and any visitors

Consider extra telephone extensions around the home, or an answering machine, rather than rushing to answer the phone.

A personal fall alarm system will reassure you and your family.

For further information on these systems contact Age Concern’s Information Line (see back of leaflet).

Try and keep your home warm as cold muscles work less efficiently and can increase the chance of accident and injury.

If you have a pet that gets under your feet consider fitting a brightly coloured collar to make them more visible.