

To Your Health

Watch Your Step: Staying Safe in Snowy/Icy Weather

By Julie Cargill, RN, NP, Retired

Both our local hospitals were very busy the several days after our recent snowfall. Why? Lots of people with fractures and other injuries related to falls due to icy conditions. This brought to mind the particular increased danger of falling due to snowy/icy roads and paths. As we all know, falls put you at risk of serious injury.

As we get older, physical changes and health conditions — and sometimes the medications used to treat those conditions — make falls more likely. In fact, falls are a leading cause of injury among older adults. I'll take this column's opportunity to consider some simple fall-prevention strategies.

1. Keep moving

Physical activity can go a long way toward fall prevention. If there's no contraindication, consider **regular** (3 to 7 times a week) activities such as walking, water workouts or modalities such as tai chi. Such activities reduce the risk of falls by improving strength, balance, coordination and flexibility. If there is some reason you are afraid such regular activity much increase your risk of falling, you might consider consulting a qualified professional such as a physical trainer or physical therapy. You will need a health care provider's referral for the latter. Occupational Therapists can also be very helpful in addressing your particular challenges. These professionals can create a custom exercise program aimed at improving your balance, flexibility, muscle strength and gait.

If you avoid physical activity because you're afraid it will make a fall more likely, tell your doctor. He or she may recommend carefully monitored exercise programs or refer you to a physical therapist.

2. Wear sensible shoes

Arizonans are rather fond of flip-flops. However, floppy slippers and shoes with slick soles can make you slip, stumble and fall. So can walking in your stocking feet. Instead, wear properly fitting, sturdy shoes with nonskid soles. Sensible shoes may also reduce joint pain as well as foot callouses.

3. Remove home hazards

Take a look around your home. Your living room, kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, hallways and stairways may be have some fall hazards. To make your home safer:

- Remove boxes, newspapers, electrical cords and phone cords from high traffic areas.
- Secure loose rugs with double-faced tape, tacks or a slip-resistant backing. Better yet, remove the rugs from your house.
- Repair loose, tiles or floorboards.
- Store clothing, dishes, food and other necessities within easy reach.
- **Never** stand on chairs to reach elevated items. That's what stepstools are for!
- Immediately clean spilled liquids, grease or food.
- Use nonslip mats in your bathtub or shower. Consider using a bath seat, which allows you to sit while showering.

4. Light up your living space

Keep your home brightly lit to avoid tripping on objects that are hard to see. Also:

- Place night lights in your bedroom, bathroom and hallways.
- Place a lamp within reach of your bed for middle-of-the-night needs.
- Make clear paths to light switches that aren't near room entrances. Consider trading traditional switches for glow-in-the-dark or illuminated switches.
- Turn on the lights before going up or down stairs.
- Store flashlights in easy-to-find places in case of power outages (which we never have 😊).

5. Use assistive devices

- Hand rails for both sides of stairways
- Nonslip treads for bare-wood steps
- A raised toilet seat or one with armrests
- Grab bars for the shower or tub
- A sturdy plastic seat for the shower or tub — plus a hand-held shower nozzle for bathing while sitting down
- Don't hesitate to use a cane or walker; quad canes can be very helpful with questionable outside walking conditions.

6. Consider personal complicating health care factors

- List and review your medications; review at every health care provider appt (some may cause side effects or interactions that compromise your gait stability).
- Certain eye, ear or other conditions may also compromise your stability

Hopefully, just making sure you are aware of these issues will keep you safe and healthy into the New Year and many to follow!