

Winter Season Poses Increased Danger of Falling 10 SAFETY TIPS

By Dr. Levan Atanelov, M.D. Director/CEO of Steady Strides Fall Prevention and Stroke Rehabilitation Medical Institute

The winter season can be a time of increased danger for seniors. According to the Centers for Disease Control, fall-related deaths among seniors have almost tripled since 2000. Every 11 seconds an older adult is treated in the emergency room for a fall. Every 19 minutes an older adult dies from a fall, reports the National Council on Aging. Muddy, slippery, and frozen surfaces are treacherous factors that can lead to increased falls. Now more than ever, it is especially important to keep safety in mind.

Here are 10 winter safety tips from Dr. Levan Atanelov, Director of Baltimore's Steady Strides Fall Prevention and Stroke Rehabilitation Medical Institute:

1. Watch the weather report and plan your activities around high hazard days.
2. Scan your environment to identify unsafe areas. Avoid walkways with cracks, potholes and uneven surfaces. Report to your local city government if you notice unsafe public spaces.
3. Consider using walking sticks or a ski pole to help you maintain balance in slippery or snowy conditions. When using a cane, get an ice gripper cane tip.
4. Clear steps, walkways and sidewalks shortly after snow to prevent melting and refreezing. Keep salted. If you need help, ask a neighbor or friend.
5. Wear boots in snow and ice with good traction and rubber soles. Consider using traction cleats over boots. For extra protection, use boots that reach above the ankles. Avoid high heels.
6. Carry kitty litter for slick surfaces. Encourage older adults to carry a Ziploc bag filled with a lightweight kitty litter in their pocket and cast it out ahead of themselves on very slick surfaces.
7. Go out with a friend for increased safety or consider having daily necessities like food and medications delivered.
8. Whenever possible use safe alternatives when reaching for high placed objects. Use step stools instead of chairs or other furniture when reaching. Consider marking trip hazards like cords with bright colored tape.
9. Remember to dress warmly to help keep your muscles relaxed. Tense muscles adversely affect balance.

10. Take your time and don't rush. Maintain a stable base of support by taking short steps with toes pointed slightly outward.

Give yourself the gift of falls prevention. Here are additional suggestions from the National Council on Aging:

- ❖ Use fall alarm systems that are motion triggered without hitting a button
- ❖ Install higher toilets in the home
- ❖ Replace multifocal glasses with single vision eyeglass lenses
- ❖ Set up grab bars in bathroom and next to outside steps or inside thresholds
- ❖ Install firm stair railings on both sides of stairways and set automatic lights over stairways and by outside entrances
- ❖ Cover the entryway to the home and provide a table to set down bags while finding keys
- ❖ Shorter days mean more time in the dark – use tiny flashlights to attach to keys, hats, and coat buttons

One important thing to keep in mind is that older adults don't fall just because of unsafe surfaces in the environment. The same people did not fall in the same environment when they were younger. Older adults fall because 9 times out of 10, there are biomechanical vulnerabilities causing balance and gait disorders which can be identified and corrected to prevent further falls. It is therefore important to undergo a thorough biomechanical assessment by a physician trained to help diagnose and treat fall risk, balance, and gait deficits.

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