



PREVENT FALLS
ALLS

stay on your feet!



**Vancouver
CoastalHealth**
Promoting wellness. Ensuring care.

Vancouver Coastal Health Fall and Injury Prevention
fallprevention.vch.ca

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preventing falls

Preventing falls is important to help maintain a healthy and independent lifestyle. Falls are a major reason for admission to hospital and residential care homes. Although a fall can happen to anyone, anywhere, the result of a fall is usually more serious as we age.

The first step to avoiding a fall is to understand what causes us to fall.

The second step is to take action to prevent the fall.

This book suggests simple, practical things you can do to remain active and independent.



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causes of falls

There is no single reason why people fall. A fall usually occurs when several events happen at the same time. The causes of falls are often called risk factors. The more risk factors, the greater your chances of falling. For example, if you walk down the hallway in your home, during the day, in no particular rush, there is little chance you will have a fall. If, however, it is the middle of the night, there are no lights on, shoes are sitting in the hall, and you are rushing to get to the bathroom, your chances of falling are much greater.

Some people believe that falls are a normal part of aging, that no matter what they do falls can't be prevented, or that it won't happen to them.

The truth is: Falls are NOT a normal part of aging and there are many things you can do to prevent falls. This booklet identifies some of the major risk factors that can cause falls and suggests ways you can decrease your chances of falling. If you want more detailed information on any of the causes of falls or what you can do to prevent them, see your health care provider.



vision

Good vision is important for safely getting around your house and community. As we get older there are some normal changes in our vision that can affect how well we can see. These include things like being more sensitive to shiny surfaces, having trouble seeing at night, and needing more time for our eyes to adjust when we go from a bright room to a dark room. There are also some eye diseases that are more common as we get older. These include glaucoma, cataracts, macular degeneration and diabetic retinopathy.

Do you:

- ▶ See your eye doctor every two years?
- ▶ Have dirty or scratched eye glasses?
- ▶ Notice you are more sensitive to glare?
- ▶ Have difficulty or avoid reading?

What you can do:

- ▶ **Have** regular eye exams by an eye doctor to identify age-related eye diseases such as cataracts and glaucoma.
- ▶ **Use** different or brighter colours to mark objects in your home that you need to reach for such as light switches, grab bars or handrails.
- ▶ **Add** different coloured strips to the edge of steps to show how deep each step is.
- ▶ **Clean** eye glasses often to improve visibility.
- ▶ **Increase** the amount of light in your entire house.
- ▶ **Use** night lights, especially in the path from the bedroom to the bathroom.



taking risks

Taking risks and putting yourself in unsafe situations can increase the chances of a fall. Look at daily activities to see if there are safer ways to accomplish everyday tasks. If you answer yes to any of the following questions you may be taking chances and putting yourself in harms way.

Do you:

- ▶ Climb onto furniture when reaching for something?
- ▶ See hazards in your home but don't get them fixed?
- ▶ Move heavy objects by yourself?
- ▶ Wear slippers with an open heel or socks around the house?
- ▶ Rush to get things done or be on time?
- ▶ Do things on your own rather than ask for help?
- ▶ Get overtired by trying to do too much?
- ▶ Go up and down stairs carrying things in both hands?

What you can do:

- ▶ **Use** a sturdy step stool with a handrail to reach high places.
- ▶ **Fix** unsafe areas of your home. (see Home and Community Hazards, pages 11-12).
- ▶ **Store** items on lower shelves.
- ▶ **Keep** regularly used items at arms reach.
- ▶ **Wear** lace-up sturdy shoes with nonskid soles.
- ▶ **Look** where you are going, try not to be distracted or to rush.
- ▶ **Ask** for help to carry or move heavy and bulky objects.
- ▶ **Minimize** sudden movement and avoid changing positions quickly.
- ▶ **Use** a walker or cane, if one has been recommended for you.
- ▶ **Keep** one hand free to hold the handrail even when carrying items.



medication use

It is important to learn about your medications and take them as prescribed. Dizziness, drowsiness or loss of balance are some of the negative effects of medications that can cause falls. Older adults who take four or more medications a day, including over the counter medications and herbal supplements, have a significantly greater risk of falls. Medications that help you sleep can also increase your chances of falling. Sedatives, anti-depressants, and anti-psychotic drugs can reduce mental alertness, worsen balance and gait, and cause drops in blood pressure while standing. Alcohol can also react with many common medicines to affect your balance and increase your fall risk.

Do you:

- ▶ Take 4 or more medications?
- ▶ Take medication to help you sleep?
- ▶ Neglect to take your medications as prescribed or recommended?
- ▶ Drink more alcohol than the recommended low-risk drinking guidelines (9 standard drinks per week)?

What you can do:

- ▶ **Know** why you are taking each medication.
- ▶ **Use** only your own medications.
- ▶ **Go to** the same drug store for all your prescription and non-prescription needs.
- ▶ **Visit** your doctor and pharmacist to review all your medications periodically.
- ▶ **Use** alcohol in moderation and tell your doctor and pharmacist how much alcohol you drink.
- ▶ **Keep** a list of all your medications and take it with you when you visit your doctor or pharmacist.
- ▶ **Tell** your doctor and pharmacist if your medications are making you drowsy or dizzy.
- ▶ **Know** the common side effects of all medications taken.
- ▶ **Remove** all medications you no longer use or are out of date to your pharmacist.



illness

A **chronic illness** is a condition that lasts a long time and for which there is usually no medical cure (such as arthritis, stroke, cancer or heart disease). An **acute illness** is one that lasts a short time and begins suddenly (such as the flu or throat infection). Both chronic and acute illness increase your chances of having a fall. The more chronic illnesses you have, the greater your risk of falls. You are also more likely to fall when you are ill, tired, or upset. If you are ill, for every day you spend in bed, it takes at least three days of activity to gain back your normal strength. Keeping as active as possible is very important to staying strong.

Do you:

- ▶ Have an ongoing illness or illnesses that affects your lifestyle?
- ▶ Fatigue easily?
- ▶ Experience pain due a chronic illness or condition?
- ▶ Restrict your participation in activities due to your health?

What you can do:

- ▶ **Learn** about your illness or condition.
- ▶ **Join** a support group if you have a chronic condition that affects your lifestyle.
- ▶ **Learn** how to manage your illness to remain as active as possible.
- ▶ **Increase** your activity level gradually to your usual level, after an acute illness.
- ▶ **Use** meal delivery, housecleaning, and grocery services until your normal abilities return.
- ▶ **Eat** a healthy diet and drink plenty of fluids.
- ▶ **Find** activities that you can do without fatigue or discomfort.
- ▶ **Monitor** your activity level and stay within your comfort zone.
- ▶ **Visit** your doctor to monitor your illnesses/conditions.
- ▶ **Maintain** regular participation in activities to maintain strength and balance.
- ▶ **Talk** to your doctor about the correct pain medications to take. Inactivity and pain can cause you more harm than many medications.



fear of falling

Fear of falling is a serious concern for many people and can restrict both social and physical activities. Perhaps you know someone who has been injured or disabled by a fall. Or maybe you have taken a minor spill yourself and are afraid the next one may be worse. Although a fall may damage more than your dignity, you do not need to let the fear of falling rule your life. In fact, the fear of falling itself increases your chances of having a fall if you allow yourself to become inactive.

Do you:

- ▶ Stay indoors and avoid going for a walk for fear of having a fall?
- ▶ Avoid social activities that require travel outside the house?
- ▶ Choose not to use a cane or walker because you think it makes you look more dependent or “old”?
- ▶ Think frequently about the dangers of a second fall?

What you can do:

- ▶ **Exercise** to improve your strength and balance.
- ▶ **Include** activities such as dancing, gardening, and stretching to improve flexibility and balance.
- ▶ **Stay** as active as possible after a fall and return to regular routines as soon as possible.
- ▶ **Continue** to exercise, socialize and participate in normal activities after a fall.
- ▶ **Use** a cane or walker to maintain your independence and be sure they are fitted and used correctly.



what to do if you fall

Take the time to develop a plan of what you might do after a fall. Some things to consider are:

- ▶ Wear a personal alarm around your neck.
- ▶ Keep a mobile or cordless telephone with you at all times.
- ▶ Set up quick dial numbers on your home phone.
- ▶ Carry a whistle.
- ▶ Have a friend or family member call you daily and leave them a spare key, so they can get to you quickly.

Learn and practice how to get up off the floor if you are not injured.

GETTING UP AFTER A FALL

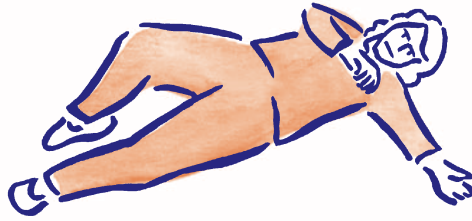
- ▶ Stay quiet for a moment — don't panic.
- ▶ If you are injured, stay where you are. Call for help using one of the methods mentioned above.
- ▶ If you are not injured, use your judgment and try to get up. See next page for illustrated instructions.

IF YOU CANNOT GET UP:

- ▶ Don't panic – use one of the strategies in your plan to get help.
- ▶ Try to stay warm.
- ▶ Gently move around to stop one part of the body getting too much pressure.

Let your doctor know that you have had a fall.

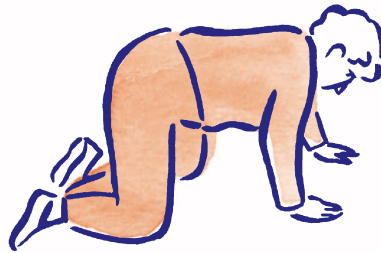
GETTING UP AFTER A FALL



- 1 Look around for a sturdy piece of furniture, such as a chair.



- 2 Roll onto your side.



- 3 Crawl or drag yourself over to the chair. If you can, pull your walking aid along with you.



- 4 From a kneeling position, put your arms up onto the seat of the chair.



- 5 Place your strongest foot flat on the floor.



- 6 Push up with your arms and legs, move your bottom around.



- 7 Sit down. Rest before trying to move.

Take your time, and if you don't succeed the first time, rest and try again.

home

Home is the most common place for older adults to fall. Half of all injuries from falls happen at home. Look around your house to find areas that may present problems. You can often make some simple and inexpensive changes to make your home safer and reduce the risk of falls.

Do the:

- ▶ Front steps, walkways and driveways need repair?
- ▶ Walkways have cracks, hole, leaves and debris?
- ▶ Stairs need handrails installed or replaced inside and out?
- ▶ Stairs have clutter and items stored on them?
- ▶ Stairs seem dark or difficult to see?
- ▶ Carpets and rugs slip and curl up?
- ▶ Walking areas have telephone and electrical cords and clutter?

What you can do:

- ▶ **Repair** and remove debris from outdoor sidewalks and steps.
- ▶ **Install** or repair handrails on both sides of stairs.
- ▶ **Clear** clutter from walkways and stairs.
- ▶ **Increase** the wattage of light bulbs in your whole house, especially at the top and bottom of the stairs.
- ▶ **Remove** loose carpets or rugs that you may trip over.
- ▶ **Use** only non-slip rugs on the kitchen and bathroom floor, and non-skid mats, decals or abrasive strips in the bathtub and shower.
- ▶ **Install** nightlights in the bedroom, bathroom and hallways.



community

Community hazards include unsafe sidewalks, parks, businesses or shops. Look around your community to see if it is safe.

Check to see if there are:

- ▶ Places to sit and rest while going for a walk or waiting for a bus?
- ▶ Hand-rails in public buildings that are too wide to hold on to?
- ▶ Floors in supermarkets or public buildings that are slippery?
- ▶ Stairways or public areas that are poorly lit?
- ▶ Sidewalks that are unsafe because of tree roots or cracks?
- ▶ Public places you avoid because of a fear of falling?
- ▶ Transportation difficulties due to access and/or cost?

What you can do:

- ▶ **Report** unsafe conditions, poor lighting and unkempt bushes to property owners or managers, or to city hall.
- ▶ **Report** broken, uneven or cracked sidewalks to the municipality or city hall.
- ▶ **Find** walking and bus routes with benches and resting spots.
- ▶ **Contact** Handi-dart, social or church groups to assist with transportation.

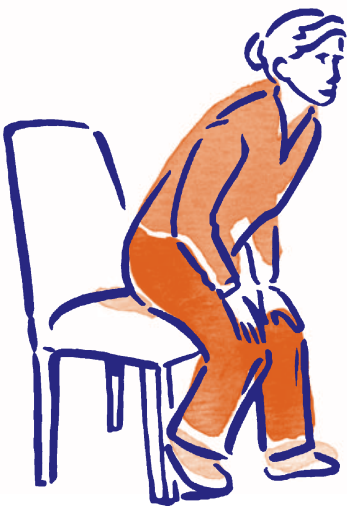


strength & balance

Exercise is the best way to reduce your risk of falling. Any activity you do can make a difference, but the best activities to reduce falls include those that improve muscle strength in the legs and improve balance, posture and stamina. We have all heard: “I have worked hard and been active all my life. I have always been able to look after myself and I’m not sick. How can my legs be weak, and how can there be anything wrong with my balance? I have never had any problems before and have never had a fall”. The fact is that muscles tend to get weaker and balance becomes harder if we don’t continue to remain active. The only way to maintain or improve both strength and balance is through exercise. It is never too late to improve your strength and maintain balance to reduce your chances of falling.

To check your leg strength and balance, try the following tests. Remember it is never too late to improve. There are some suggested exercises in the Exercise section of this book.

You may like to have a friend or family member stand by while you try these.



◀ Check your leg strength:

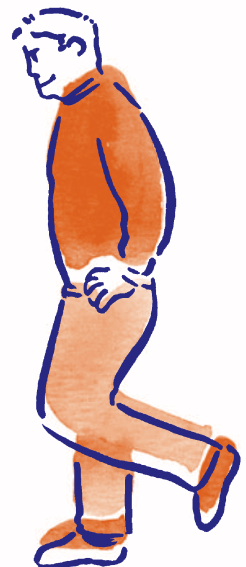
Can you get out of a chair safely without using your arms?

Can you do it three times in a row?

Check your balance:▶

For safety, try this test while standing near the kitchen counter.

Can you safely stand on one leg for 5-12 seconds without holding on to anything or anyone?



What you can do:

- ▶ **Get up** from a chair three times in a row, without using your arms, whenever you can.
- ▶ **Go up** and down stairs to keep your legs strong. Make sure you use the hand rail.
- ▶ **Walk** as much as you can. If you become tired quickly or feel unsteady, a four-wheeled walker with a seat and a basket is a great idea. Have a professional help you buy the right one.
- ▶ **Bend** and straighten your legs when you are watching TV. Add small weights to your ankles.
- ▶ **Mark** out a walking path in your house if the weather is bad. Imagine you are walking to Hawaii.
- ▶ **Call** your community centre, seniors centre, or church to find out what activity programs are offered.
- ▶ **Do** a few exercises when you make yourself a cup of tea or get a glass of water.
- ▶ **See** the Strength & Balance Exercises on the next page.
- ▶ **Make** your activities fun.

exercises

These simple exercises can help improve your strength and balance. Only do the exercises you feel safe and comfortable doing. It may be safer and easier to do just a couple of exercises at a time. If you have increased pain or a significant increase in shortness of breath stop exercising immediately. **Stand up straight. Hold onto the edge of the kitchen counter if you need to for safety. As this gets easier, try to hold on less.**



Small Squats

- 1) Stand with feet apart
- 2) Bend knees as if to sit
- 3) Keep your heels on the floor
- 4) Hold for 5 seconds



The Bird

- 1) Face counter and hold on with one hand
- 2) Stand with feet apart
- 3) Shift your weight to one side
- 4) Reach sideways as far as you can with free hand
- 5) Switch hands and reach to the other side
- 6) Hold for 5-10 seconds



Marching on the Spot

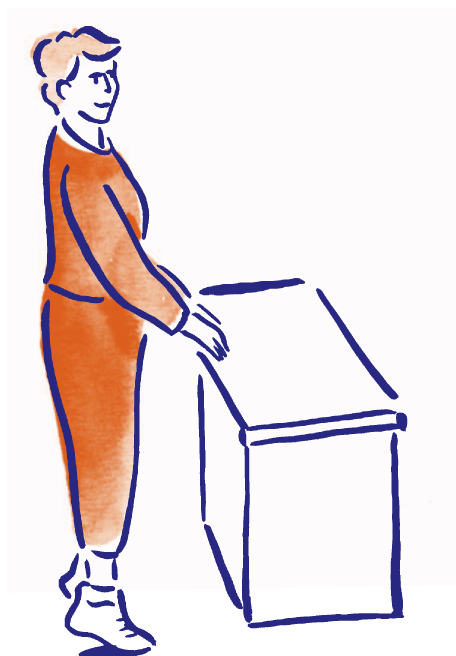
- 1) Stand straight
- 2) Lift one leg and raise the knee toward your chest
- 3) Hold the position, then slowly lower
- 4) Repeat with other leg

Here are some of the recommended physical activity programs, often found at your local community center:

- ▶ Balance training, e.g., Tai Chi
- ▶ Walking
- ▶ Dancing
- ▶ Strength training – using weights or resistance
- ▶ Water fitness

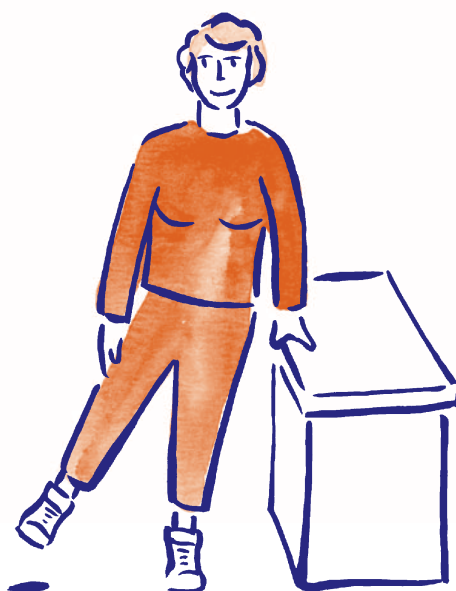
Remember: Strength and balance can reduce your risk of falling by 50%.

Speak with your doctor or health care provider about any medical condition which may affect your ability to do these exercises.



On Your Toes

- 1) Stand on tiptoes
- 2) Hold for 5 seconds
- 3) Slowly lower and rock back onto the heels, lifting up the toes
- 4) Hold the position for 5 seconds



Side Leg Raise

- 1) Stand with feet apart
- 2) Lift one leg to the side
- 3) Keep your toes pointing forward
- 4) Hold position for 5 seconds, then slowly lower
- 5) Repeat with other leg



Walk the Line

- 1) Place one foot directly in front of the other
- 2) Hold position for 10-30 seconds
- 3) Repeat with other foot
- 4) Progression: walk heel to toe along length of the counter