

Preventing Falls – Test and Assess Your Risks

Anyone can experience a fall; however, the consequences are often much greater for those 65 or older. Fractures, head trauma, and serious bleeds that occur can be disabling. Even no injuries can lead to a fear of falling which results in decreased physical activity and avoidance of social activities. Quality of life may be decreased with any of these outcomes.

Use this as a checklist to evaluate your own situation and take action to decrease your risks!

1. Physical conditions

- Problems with gait, balance, leg strength, and reflexes
Take the “Timed Up and Go Test.” Measure off 10 feet from an arm chair. Begin seated and check time it takes you to stand, walk at your usual pace to line, turn around, walk back, and sit. A time of ≥ 12 seconds could mean an increased risk of fall. Participate in an exercise program that includes balance and leg strengthening in addition to weight-bearing activities such as walking. See list at end of article for exercises you can do at home.
- Eyesight and hearing problems
Even small changes may cause you to fall. Take time to get used to new glasses or contacts and wear them. Same is true for hearing aids.
- Blood pressure issues
Getting up too quickly may cause your blood pressure to drop making you feel unsteady. If this happens to you, rise more slowly and stand still long enough to feel steady before walking.

2. Medications

- Side effects of dizziness or confusion
Let your health care providers know if you experience these and ask them to review your med list. Make sure it includes all medicines you are taking since over the counter meds can be a factor.

3. Environmental safety hazards

- Area rugs
Remove or ensure they have non-skid backing and edges do not cause trip hazard. Install grab bars near tubs / showers and toilets.
- Poor lighting
Use night lights and keep a flashlight at bedside.
- Trip hazards in walking paths
Check pathways inside and outside your house. Remove clutter, arrange furniture to keep low pieces (like coffee tables) out of path, and keep electric cords next to walls. Also beware of pets! Know where they are and gently move them out of the way before walking. Do not try to step over them.
- Stairways
Make sure they are well lit and have sturdy handrails, preferably on both sides. Use handrails!
- Hard to reach items
Use step stool with hand rail. Obtain a “reach stick” for use to grab items instead of climbing.
- Walking in socks or shoes with slick soles
Wear rubber soled, low-heeled shoes that fully support your feet.

What to do if you fall

1. Remain still on the floor or ground for a moment; take several deep breaths to calm yourself.
2. Determine if you are hurt before attempting to get up.
3. If you feel that you can get up without help, roll onto your side and pause taking a few deep breaths in this position. Slowly get up on your hands and knees and crawl to a sturdy chair.
4. Put your hands on the seat of the chair and pull one knee up to place that foot firmly on the floor. Keep the other knee on the floor. Slowly pull yourself up and turn to sit on the chair.
5. If you are hurt or cannot get up on your own, call for help. Carrying a portable or cell phone in your pocket makes this easier. Subscription services are available for push button devices on a necklace or bracelet to call for help.

If a chair is not available the same process can be used, but use your hands on the floor (instead of on the seat of the chair) to press yourself up when on one knee and one foot. It is easier to do if you start from a seated position with legs loosely crossed in front of you and place hands on floor to side opposite the leg crossed in front. From here you can spiral up onto one knee and one foot.

It is a good idea to practice both methods when someone is with you so it will be easier to remember if needed.

Home Exercises

1. For balance
 - Stand on one foot (for 10 seconds, repeating 10 to 15 times on each leg)
 - Walk in a straight line
 - Walk heel to toe
2. For leg strengthening (aim for 2 sets of 10 to 15 repetitions)
 - Back leg raises
 - Side leg raises
 - Knee curls
 - Toe stands

Begin by holding onto the back of a sturdy chair while standing or use a countertop or wall for support. As you improve, progress from holding with both hands to one hand, then one finger, then no hands.

Another leg strengthening exercise:

- Sitting in a sturdy chair with no arms, stand and sit 10 to 15 times (repeat for another set)

Use your hands if needed and progress to no hands, with arms crossed over chest, or extend arms out in front of you.

A tip to remember when practicing any balance exercise is to find a spot out in front of you to stare at. Focusing on that spot will help you tune out distractions and become more centered. The same is true whenever you experience dizziness.

If you feel unable to safely participate in these types of exercises, consult with your physician. Physical therapy may be a better place to start.

The NIH Institute on Aging is an excellent resource for more information!

Submitted by Vicky Shelton, D.Ph.
CSUMC Parish Health Ministry Team