Preventing Falls
Around the House

Greg & Georgia Fitzhugh

Caregiver Aid
This booklet is dedicated to the Caregivers of America who daily serve others with Love and Compassion.

The information in this booklet is not intended as personal medical advice. Please consult a health care professional for recommendations that are specifically intended for your needs and living conditions.

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Why is Fall Prevention so Important?

No one plans to fall. It just happens. Even though many falls are preventable, they are actually quite common. Some people are more than likely to fall than others. Falls are common in some populations and are often the cause of injury, even life-endangering injuries. They are often unreported.

Statistics tell us who among us is most likely to fall. Someone who is 75 years old or older is more likely to fall. Persons who have diabetes, Parkinson’s disease or have had a stroke are most likely to fall because of their weakness from their health conditions. One out of three older adults (those ages 65 or older) will fall each year. (1)

Falls cause serious damage to our health. Studies show that a quarter of all falls cause fractures to bones, most often hip fractures. (2) And, one fall often leads to more falls, unfortunately. Twenty to thirty percent of people who fall suffer moderate to severe injuries such as lacerations, hip fractures, or head traumas. (2,3) These injuries can make it hard to get around or live independently, and increase the risk of early death. Falls are the most common cause of traumatic brain injuries (TBI). (2) In 2000, 46% of fatal falls among older adults were due to traumatic brain injury. (4)
Good news!

Even if you are over 75, and you have a condition which makes you likely to fall, there are things you can do to prevent the first fall and any others.

Yes, no one plans to fall. A fall just happens; it is not planned. But you can *plan not to fall*.

Taking steps to prevent falls reduces the risk of falling for everyone in the household.

This booklet will give you some tips you can use to improve your awareness and help you prevent falling. We’ll help you identify fall hazards and correct them in your household and surroundings.
Improve Health and Stay on Your Feet

What health condition could be improved to keep you from falling? Here is a list of some health conditions which can contribute to being unsteady and lead to a fall:

◊ Osteoporosis
◊ Blood pressure changes between sitting & standing
◊ Diabetes
◊ Parkinson’s disease
◊ History of a heart condition or stroke
◊ Impaired vision
◊ Pain during walking, standing, or physical exercise from arthritis or any condition
◊ Foot pain and deformities
◊ Vitamin D deficiency

Table 2. Potentially Modifiable Risk Factors for Falls in Older Persons in “Management of Falls in Older Persons: A Prescription for Prevention” (5).

The American Geriatric Society recommends that all patients 65 and over should be asked if they have fallen in their annual check-up. One fall often leads to another fall. Your physician can perform a risk assessment for you at least once a year. It will indicate your risk factors and help him to advise a plan for dealing with medical conditions which could contribute to falls.(6)
Your balance, your gait (your way of walking), and muscle weakness are critical in preventing a fall and it is possible to modify each of these. Sometimes, balance can be improved by exercise, by mobility equipment, by proper monitoring of medications. Gait can often be improved by proper foot care, proper foot wear and by exercise and physical therapy. Muscle weakness can often be improved by regular physical exercise, physical therapy, and mobility aids.

**The medications you take can be factors in your risk of falling.** Besides prescription medications, over-the-counter medications, vitamins, herbal supplements, and alcohol use may affect your chances of falling.

You probably realize that you are more likely to fall when you are sleepy, dizzy, or disoriented. Psychoactive medications are usually the kinds of drugs which may cause unsteadiness that could lead to a fall.

**Make a list of each medication** you take regularly or occasionally. You can ask your pharmacist to print a complete list of all of your prescriptions, dosages, etc. and bring it with you to your doctor visit. Let your doctor examine the list to see if there are drugs you are taking which interfere with other drugs, herbs or vitamins that you take. Perhaps the dosages could be changed. Work with your physician to closely monitor the effects of your medications. Changes may be made to cut your risk of falls.
One Fall Leads to Fear of Falling.

Persons who have fallen become afraid of falling. (7) This leads them and their caregivers to restrict activities in their home and outside the home. This is depressing for everyone concerned. It certainly leads one to worry, and to think that their health is a bigger problem than it really is.

Often, this attitude causes one to become socially withdrawn and isolated. If you can’t safely leave your own house, or safely take a bath and wash your hair, then going to the store, or going to church, or having visitors come over are no longer in your plans.

At the same time, sitting in bed is not the answer to preventing falls either. Reduced activity leads to reduced strength and poorer balance. In turn, those lead to increased disability and increased dependence. Caregivers face more stress in trying to persuade the patient to get out of bed and participate in life. Everyone in the house has a poorer quality of life and increased stress.
Ask the doctor about the patient’s level of understanding of dangers. Dementia can make a person constantly fearful and suspicious, or it can cause them to be oblivious to obvious dangers. If you or your loved one has a fear of falling that is causing them anxiety and social withdrawal, then it is time to get help.

Having a risk assessment done by the doctor is one way to get objective information about the patient’s condition and his likelihood of falling. Discussing the effects of medication and fall-risk provides more information that is helpful and may indicate changes that can be made.

If the patient is unaware of the danger of falling, then it is imperative that the caregivers at home or in a facility make sure that precautions are taken in the environment to prevent falling.

“Making changes in your home is the next step to making life easier for the patient who fears falling and for the caregivers involved.”
Risk Factors at your Front and Back Door

Having safe and accessible access to your home is not a luxury. It could be a life-saver in a house fire or other emergency when you must get out of the house quickly.

Obstacles out!

Clearing away all obstacles in and around doorways is the first step. Look at furniture, rugs, toys, shoes, and other things in the pathway, and move them aside. Keep the path clear at all times. However, there may be things that you want near your door, such as an umbrella, or a container for mail. Think of some ways to put those nearby, but not on the floor taking up space and blocking the pathway.

Up and Over

Thresholds can be troublesome to cane, walker, and wheelchair users. If you have a threshold at any door over ¾ inch to 6 inches in height, a threshold ramp would be a good solution for that doorway. There are threshold ramps for both outdoor and indoor use, and in both aluminum and rubber. Many are removable and lightweight. Certainly, a caregiver should supervise a patient when she is crossing a high threshold.
**Safety on Steps**

If you have steps outside your front or back door, then make sure that they are level, evenly spaced and in sound condition. Repair or replace any loose, worn, or rotted areas, and make sure that there are no nails sticking out of wooden stairs.

You can further reduce the chance of slipping on steps by adding abrasive strips or painting stripes with a rough deck textured paint. Painting the edge of the steps with a bright color can help one easily see the step clearly and gauge the height of the step.

In the winter, keep the steps clear by shoveling or spreading salt or an ice-melting mixture.

Add lighting near an outdoor step. Position the lighting fixtures to reduce shadows and use the highest wattage allowable to light the step and doorway.

All steps should have sturdy hands rail that are about 30 inches in height to accommodate the reach of an adult. It is good to have handrails on both sides of the steps. In most cities, handrails are usually required by building codes. If you are having new hand rails installed, be sure to contact your local building code department.

**Fast Get Away**

If you are in an emergency situation, you need to leave the house quickly. You and your loved one want to get out without risking injury and accident. Always keep the path clear to make the exit fast and easy for you both.
Safety in the Living Room

Statistics state that 31% of falls occur in living rooms.

Do you wonder why falls would commonly occur in living rooms? I think it’s because that’s where seniors relax and spend time. It’s a place they are familiar with, and where their attention is most likely to be on the television, the computer, visitors, the telephone, pets or family members.

Your living room is likely to be your “landing zone” after a meal, or after a long day. It’s the place where you “land” on the chair or couch and get busy with things like the phone, the TV, the computer, your book, or mail. Lots of other things “land” in the living room too. It’s likely to be a cluttered place, with tables and couches, remotes, magazines, paperwork, mail, eyeglasses, craft projects, coffee cups, etc.

Your Landing Zone

Take some time for fall prevention in your living room every day. Just a few minutes of clearing the traffic path and your “landing zone” in your living room could make a difference. Of course, getting your home evaluated for safety by an occupational therapist or other health care professional is always best.
Here are some points to remember when you’re preparing your comfort room.

*Clear the runway. Get those shoes, pets’ toys, kids’ toys and stuff out of your traffic pattern. Find another place to put them, maybe in a container, out of the traffic pattern.
*Remove loose rugs and tack down loose carpet corners.
*Put the landline phone and its cord in a place that will not be in a traffic pattern. Put the phone near the plug and put a chair nearby, so you won’t be stepping near the cord. Or, use a cordless phone or a cell phone.
*When using the vacuum cleaner, the fan, the heater, any plug-in appliance, unplug it after you use it, and put the item away. Don’t leave electric cords littering the traffic pattern.
*Use a chair pocket and put your eyeglasses, remote, tissues, cell phone, and other commonly used items inside the pocket. If necessary, use a reacher for items on tables around you.
*Improve the lighting around your area. Keep a night light on at night.
*Slow down, look around when standing and sitting. Take time to balance yourself when you rise from a chair and when you sit down to reduce dizziness.

Fall prevention is important. It’s worth few minutes a day to clear your special space to make it safer for you and everyone you care about.
Assess Risk in the Bedroom

Your bedroom should be a place where you can relax, not be a hazardous obstacle course during the day or the night. Each time you get up at night, sleepy and unsteady, moving around without your glasses in the dark, you are taking a chance of falling right there in your own bedroom. You can reduce and even eliminate those fall risks.

Bed

*First of all, can you or the patient get out of bed independently, or is help required?

*Bed too low? If the bed is too low, then when you sit down, you will notice that your knees are higher than your hips when you are sitting on the edge of the bed. You can increase the bed’s height by putting bed risers under the legs of the bed.

*Bed too high? If your bed is too high, your feet will not completely touch the floor when you are sitting on the edge of the bed. To solve this problem, lower the bed by removing the bed frame wheels or use a lower mattress or box spring.

*Do you have difficulty sitting up to get out of bed, or are you unsteady when getting in the bed? Get a half bedrail which will fit under the mattress or attach to the bed frame.

*Talk to your doctor or occupational therapist for suggestions. You need a bed that is appropriate for your needs and does not limit your independence unnecessarily.
Pathways

*Once out of bed, what’s in your path? I hope it’s not a slippery rug that will wad up under your feet and cause you to trip. Get rid of that. If you want to keep your feet warm when you get out of bed, then wear some non-slip bed socks, and forget the rug.

*In the bedroom, adequate lighting within reach is important. There are lighting options which use a remote control, so you won’t even have to get out of bed to turn on the light. Or, put a flashlight on your bedside table. Place nightlights in the bedroom to illuminate the room at night. Add additional nightlights along the hall or path to the bathroom, as well as one in the bathroom.

*Keep your glasses, tissues, night medications and phone on a table by the bed. Clear off all other clutter on that table. Put phone cords behind furniture out of the pathway, or use a cell phone or cordless phone in the bedroom.

*A bedroom may have a lot of furniture, and for a wheelchair or walker user that can mean getting stuck there. Clear the path as needed, and move out furniture or clutter that blocks your path. It is essential that you are able to move around the bedroom safely.

*How about the closet? Can you reach what you need without climbing a stepstool? There are ways to make clothing more accessible to you by adding shelves, lowering racks, or improving the arrangement of the items. Moving items from a closet into dresser drawers may be the simplest solution.

It’s worth the effort to make your bedroom a safe, convenient and restful place.
Slip & Slide in the Bathroom

A warm bath can soothe and relax aching joints and muscles, but statistics show that the bathroom can be the most dangerous room in the house, especially for elderly.

Bathrooms are dangerous because they are usually full of hard surfaces like ceramic tile, marble and porcelain fixtures. Bathrooms can easily get wet and slippery, and have rug/mat tripping hazards.

It is also easy to slip while we’re trying to step in and out of the tub, and get on and off the toilet. Add to this list our tendency to grow less mobile and stable with age, and we’re left with plenty of opportunity for accidents.

Many bathroom safety improvements can be made easily. Others may require the help of a professional.

Here are some suggestions to help you enjoy your safe, warm bath while taking precautions to prevent falls.

*Shower chairs* and benches will help anyone with balance issues. You can shower for as long as you wish when seated on a shower chair and using a hand-held shower wand to bathe independently. Sitting will lessen fatigue from standing.
*Grab bars* installed in strategic locations around the tub and toilets are important. Soap dishes and towel bars are not substitutes for grab bars. Using them for “hand-holds” puts the user in danger when the fixture releases and causes a loss of balance and a serious fall. For better safety, have grab bars installed by a competent installer, so the user can depend on a safe and stable hand-hold.

*A battery-operated Bath Lift* provides a seat for the bather and will lower and raise into a tub. This makes bathing in a tub possible for a person who would otherwise not be able to sit down and stand up from a tub.

*Using non-slip mats* will help with the wet environment. However, it is important to consider the tripping hazard a bathmat might cause to someone using a walker or has other stability or mobility issues.

*There needs to be adequate lighting* in your bathroom day and night. A light switch right by the door is always handy.

*Avoid scalding water* by turning down the temp on your water heater to 120° or lower. Make sure HOT and COLD faucets are clearly labeled in tub/shower and sink.

*Don’t lock the bathroom door* if you don’t need to do so. If you must, use door locks that can be unlocked from outside the bathroom in case of an emergency.

Ask an Occupational Therapist to evaluate your abilities and the necessary bathroom upgrades needed to make your bathroom safe for your particular needs.
Controlling Risk in the Kitchen

The kitchen is a room where there’s a lot of activity. Whether you are making your meals from scratch or just microwaving a prepared dinner, it is important to move around safely in a place where there is plenty of risk.

First, eliminate bending and reaching as much as possible. Move fridge items you use frequently, like the milk carton, to upper shelves and door shelves of your refrigerator. Locate your dishes, pots and pans, and serving bowls in places where you don’t have to reach or bend over to get them. Use a reacher in the kitchen to reach and lift items. Move the racks in your oven so you don’t have to bend over so far to reach them. Metal safety bars are not just for bathrooms. Install a safety bar on a wall wherever you need help in standing up, like near shelves or cabinets where you bend over frequently.

Reduce obstacles and clutter in your kitchen. Step-stools and rugs have to go. These can cause falls in the kitchen. Clear the clutter on the countertops, the tables, the top of the fridge and the top of the microwave. Keep pets out of the kitchen during meal preparation.
Keep the floor near the sink dry. You might want to have a Swiffer or a mop to soak up spills. Don’t leave a towel or rug there where you might slip!

Reduce clean-up. Do all you can so you won’t have to wash lots of dishes, pots and pans. Line pans with foil. Use crock-pot liners. Use your dishwasher instead of washing dishes in the sink. Keep spills wiped up by keeping a cotton cloth mop or sponge mop handy.

Use a rolling cart to move items from kitchen to dining room, or from stove to table for serving. You could use a small rolling microwave table as your cart. This will help you save steps when moving around the kitchen or the kitchen and dining room. You will be less likely to spill or drop the glasses and plates when using the cart for a load. After meals, load the cart and roll it up to the sink or the dishwasher.

Making mealtimes more enjoyable, convenient and safer is worthwhile.
Equipment and Devices to Improve Safety in Your Home

For the outdoors

For doorways, both interior and exterior, use a threshold ramp.
LED motion detection lights, both outdoors and indoors.
To move a wheelchair into a van, use a folding suitcase ramp.
Outdoor grab bar for exterior entrances near doorways or steps.
Hand rails at all steps, porches, even along sidewalks, outdoors.

For the Bathroom:

Bathrooms grab bars around toilets, inside and around tubs.
Raised toilet seat.
Toilet with armrests.
Shower chair placed in the shower, with a back or without a back.
Transfer bench for persons in wheelchairs.
Bath lift: battery-operated lift for lowering and raising in and out of the tub.
For any Room in the Home:

Reacher device extends your reach and allows you to avoid bending over or using step–stools.

Furniture risers to raise the level of a bed, sofa or chair for improved access.

Beds which can be raised or lowered in height, and that can elevate the head or the feet.

Canes, walkers and wheelchairs for more independent mobility.

Fall detection devices:

There are special devices which can detect falls in the home which can be worn by a patient or installed in one’s residence. A wearable device has the advantages that it can be wherever the patient is and the patient can quickly and easily push a button to summon help for an emergency. There are home monitoring systems which can also detect falls and monitor a patient and their activities, and even their health conditions with internet communication to caregivers.

Get more information about devices that could fit your safety needs and caregivers’ needs by searching online for fall detection devices, health monitoring systems, or medical alert devices.
ENDNOTES


About Us

This booklet is presented to you by Caregiver-Aid.com, an online company which provides medical mobility and safety equipment for patients and caregivers.

Greg and Georgia Fitzhugh, owners of Caregiver-Aid.com, have been caregivers for elderly parents, and know the important role of caregivers. Greg holds an Executive Certificate in Home Modification from University of Southern California, Andrus Gerontology Center, and Georgia has degrees in rehabilitation and special education.

We hope this publication helps you and your loved ones to stay safe and healthy at home.

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