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Preventing Falls as You Grow Older

Whether it simply bruises your ego or breaks a bone, taking a fall is no fun. Each year, one in three seniors 65 and older experiences a fall—a number that has grown in recent years.¹ For people in this age group, falling is the leading cause of injury and injury-related deaths.^{1,2}

Whether due to concerns about independence or worrying others, however, fewer than half these people tell the doctor about their falls. But that could add insult to injury because one fall may lead to another.³

Don't keep it a secret. Be upfront with your doctor—and with me. Provide details about when, where, and how you fell. We can help you pinpoint the problem and suggest changes you can make. For starters, falling might be due to:

- A chronic health condition
- An infection
- A balance disorder
- Vision problems
- Muscle weakness
- Medications^{2,3,4}

Stay healthy. Fortunately, falls needn't be a fait accompli. Even simple lifestyle changes can make a difference in preventing falls. This includes maintaining good physical condition with exercise, sleep, and nutrition. Also, stay well hydrated with plenty of water. And limit alcohol, which can slow your reflexes and throw you off balance. Wear properly fitting, sturdy shoes with nonskid soles and toss out the floppy slippers and shoes with slick soles.^{2,3,4,5,6}

With your doctor's permission, engage in exercise that improves strength, flexibility, balance, and gait. This might include walking, water workouts, or tai chi—a gentle exercise that involves meditative movements. Is a fear of falling keeping you stuck in your easy chair? Your doctor may suggest physical therapy or a guided exercise program.^{3,4}

Review your meds. Here's where I can really help. Make a list of your medications. Do any make you dizzy or drowsy? Your doctor and I can review this list with you, discuss any side effects you are having, and decide whether it makes sense to change your medications.^{1,4} Of course, don't make any changes without first having a conversation with your doctor.

Make changes on the home front. Here are a few more ways to help prevent falls at home:

- Clean up spills right away.
- Remove throw rugs.
- Clear newspapers and electrical or phone cords from walkways.
- Use nonslip mats in the bathtub and shower.
- Put nightlights in hallways, bedrooms, and bathroom.
- Keep flashlights in easy-to-reach places.
- Turn on lights before going up or down stairs.
- Install handrails on both sides of stairways.⁴

Has your doctor suggested an assistive device such as a cane or walker—but your pride won't quite allow it? It may help to focus on how this can keep you more independent. Other assistive devices can also help prevent falls. They include:

- A raised toilet seat with armrests
- Shower or tub grab bars
- A shower seat and hand-held shower nozzle

Remember to check our store for supplies to safe-proof your home. I can help point you in the right direction.

Nothing herein constitutes medical advice, diagnosis or treatment, or is a substitute for professional advice. You should always seek the advice of your physician or other medical professional if you have questions or concerns about a medical condition.

Sources

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3. HealthDay: "Seniors May Keep Falls a Secret." Available at: http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/news/fullstory_150626.html Accessed February 16, 2015.
4. Mayo Clinic: "Healthy Aging." Available at: <http://www.mayoclinic.org/fall-prevention/ART-20047358?p=1> Accessed February 16, 2015.
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6. NIHMedlinePlus: "Home Improvements Prevent Falls." Available at: <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/magazine/issues/winter14/articles/winter14pg16-17.html> Accessed February 16, 2015.