
Safe and Secure

Preventing Falls - Issue 5

Home Safety and Security - Issue 6

Safety Behind the Wheel - Issue 7

Out and About - Issue 8

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever had this experience? You decided to make a favorite recipe. Maybe it was a chocolate cake, or banana nut bread. Everything would have turned out perfectly, *except* that you forgot to add one small but essential ingredient, such as baking powder.

An experience like that—and we've all had them—teaches us that even small things can make an important difference in how the big picture unfolds. Safety is one of those things many of us take for granted. We sometimes forget that even a little carelessness can have big consequences.

As children, we had our parents watching out for us, reminding us when something was a risk to our safety. Later, as adults, we thought about safety and security for ourselves and our family. Many of the precautions we took were more a matter of habit than they were the result of consciously thinking about safety.

Now, as older adults, it's a good time to take a step back, to think actively about why and where we might be at risk, and what we can do to eliminate or reduce our safety risks. After all, it doesn't make much sense to do everything else right—stay physically active, maintain our connections with others, and all the rest—only to have all our fine work spoiled by one careless moment!

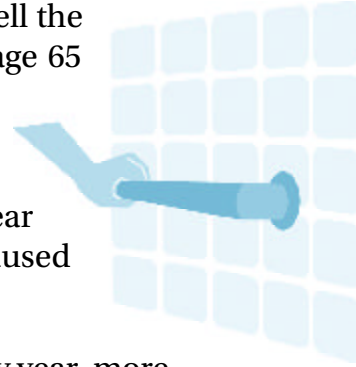
In Issue 5, we look at one of the big worries for many older people: how to keep from falling. In Issue 6, the subject is similar, but somewhat broader: how to make sure your home is safe and secure. In Issue 7, the focus is on a different but equally important safety concern: driving a car. Finally, in Issue 8, we look at going out and about, around your neighborhood or around the world, with confidence and security.

In the forms section, you'll find four forms to help you take up the personal challenge of identifying and dealing with the safety risk factors that apply to you:

- Form 5: *Checklist for Reducing Your Risk of Falling*
- Form 6-A: *Home Safety Inspection Checklist*
- Form 6-B: *Home Repairs and Home Modifications Checklist*
- Form 7: *Checklist for Older Drivers*

ISSUE 5: PREVENTING FALLS

The risk of falling increases as we age. The numbers tell the story. Every year, one in every three Americans over age 65 takes a fall. That's about 10 million falls every year. Many of these falls don't cause serious injury. That's the good news. The bad news is that many falls *are* serious and result in a hospital stay. In fact, every year nearly 10,000 Americans over 65 die from injuries caused by falling.



Hip fractures are an important part of the picture. Every year, more than a quarter million older Americans break a hip, most from falling. Breaking a hip means a lengthy hospital stay. For many, it also means that they won't be able to return to their own home when they're discharged from the hospital.

Along with the physical consequences, there are emotional and psychological costs associated with falling and the fear of falling. Those who experience a fall often feel embarrassed or discouraged about it. They worry, "Will I fall again?" and decide to limit their activity rather than risk another fall.

Not all falls can or will be prevented. No matter what our age, living an active life means taking some risks. But thousands of falls can and should be prevented. Preventing falls doesn't just happen. It takes some know-how and effort. There's work to be done! But this is a challenge worth accepting.

What Are the Risk Factors?

Our bodies change over time, and some of those changes increase the risk of falling. In addition, hidden dangers in our homes and out in the world may pose a threat. Some of these risk factors can be eliminated or reduced. Others are more difficult. Knowledge is power. The first step in cutting your risk is to have a clear understanding of the major risk factors.

The physical changes of aging make falling more likely. Most older persons, sooner or later, will experience problems with their eyesight, sense of balance, mobility, bone structure, and reflexes. Confusion, forgetfulness, and medical conditions such as stroke, Parkinson's, and Alzheimer's are also important risk factors.

These changes increase the chance that the person who falls will be injured. But physical changes are only one part of a bigger picture. In combination with physical changes, the following factors greatly increase an older person's risk of falling:

- **Environmental hazards**—Throw rugs, electrical cords, wet and slippery floors, rough floor surfaces, slick walkways and steps, and poor lighting are all examples of things or conditions that can trip you up.
- **Medications**—Most seniors take a variety of medications, both over-the-counter and prescription. Many medications cause dizziness, drowsiness, or other side effects that make it harder to maintain balance.
- **Things you don't expect**—Often, a contributing cause in a fall is a circumstance you do not expect and for which you have not prepared. You lean against a door, thinking it is latched. You walk down a poorly lighted walkway, not anticipating the small pile of weeds and clippings someone has left there.
- **Hurrying**—A former basketball coach used to tell his athletes, “Be quick, but don't hurry.” Accidents are much more likely to occur when you are distracted by trying to accomplish a task quickly. Instead of focusing on what you are doing, you are worrying about having it done and not paying close attention.

Practical Steps for Reducing Your Risk of Falling

Although it is unrealistic to think all falls can be prevented, there are many proven ways of reducing the risk of falling. An excellent starting point is to give yourself a fall-prevention checkup. Now that you understand the major risk categories, ask yourself which ones apply—or could apply—to you. Use Form 5, *Checklist for Reducing Your Risk of Falling*, as your guide.

As you think about risks and possible prevention measures, consider the following suggestions:

- If you already have a fitness program or are in physical or occupational therapy, make fall prevention one of the issues you discuss. Lowering your risk of falling should be one of the explicit goals of your program or therapy. If you are not as physically active as you could be, ask your

doctor about setting up an exercise program to build your muscle strength, joint flexibility, and coordination.

- If you have experienced episodes of dizziness, or if you think you may have a problem with balance, vision, or medications, talk with your doctor. Be persistent in seeking answers to your questions. Ask to have balance and dizziness problems tested, diagnosed, and treated.
- Eat right. A sensible diet—when, what, and how much you eat—helps improve a person’s energy, stamina, and alertness, all factors for reducing the risk of falls. Alcohol can negatively affect balance and coordination and slow the reflexes, so be careful how much alcohol you consume.
- Be aware of your surroundings. Don’t be tripped up by something you didn’t anticipate. Get in the habit of thinking two steps ahead. That way you’ll be giving yourself more time to react to your physical surroundings and the other people around you. Pay special attention whenever you are in new or unfamiliar surroundings: for example, your first hours or days in a strange hotel, or your first days and weeks in a new retirement living situation.
- Do a regular home safety inspection (see Issue 6 and Form 6-A). Look for obvious hazards, such as rough floor surfaces, throw rugs, poor lighting, extension cords, and clutter. While you are at it, consider some simple household safety modifications, such as grab bars in the bath or shower, a second hand rail on the stairs, better lighting in high traffic areas.

Using Physical Activity to Cut Your Risks

Physical inactivity is a major risk factor for falls among older persons. Lack of exercise leads to the following:

- Weakness and poor muscle tone.
- Decreased reaction time.
- Loss of bone mass.
- Poor circulation.

- Decreased sensation in hands and feet.
- Depression.

For most older adults, a program of regular exercise is one of the most effective ways to lower the risk of falling. (For more on exercise and the importance of staying physically active, see Issue 2, *Staying Physically Active*.)

Fear of Falling

Fear of falling exacts an enormous emotional and psychological toll. The experts tell us that fear of falling is almost as big a problem for seniors as falling itself. Of course, being concerned about a risk can be a good thing. You recognize a risk. You're afraid the worst might happen. You take smart steps to keep the risk as low as possible.

The problem comes when a person retreats, taking a "safe at any cost" approach. That's when fear of falling can trap a person in a vicious cycle that looks something like this:

