



alzheimer's association®

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Minimizing Risks of Falls

We take walking for granted. But, we are not born with the ability to walk. Walking takes a lot of practice. Think about it—it takes a long time before a 1-year-old is walking steadily. Walking requires precise coordination of muscles. Walking also requires the brain to coordinate incoming signals with outgoing messages to the appropriate muscles so they can respond. Any breakdown in this process can cause a person to lose balance and fall.

As we get older, our bodies change. These changes increase our risk of falling.

For example, as we get older, our eyes do not adjust when going from light to dark—and from dark to light—as readily. It is easy to trip when getting up at night to go to the toilet. Our eyes also become more sensitive to glare. The area we see becomes smaller, and our perception changes. For example, we might think a pattern on the floor is something to step over, which could cause us to trip and fall.

Arthritis or painful joints affect the way we move and walk. This can also make it easier to fall.

Our reflexes — or ability to move and respond quickly to a situation — slow down as we age. For example, if you are a younger person walking down the steps and your toe catches, you are likely to react quickly and catch yourself without falling. An older person will not be able to respond as quickly and is more likely to fall.

Our muscle strength also decreases as we age, and this can also make it easier to fall.

Many people who fall, even those who are not injured, develop a fear of falling. This fear may cause them to limit their activities, leading to reduced mobility and physical fitness, and increasing their actual risk of falling.

There are many other changes that happen in the body as we get older that make walking difficult. The more difficult it is to walk, the easier it is to fall.

Falls also happen because of things in the environment. A few of these include:

- ◆ Loose rugs or carpet
- ◆ Floor mats
- ◆ Clutter in hallways

- ◆ Poor-fitting shoes
- ◆ Exposed cords
- ◆ Uneven or slippery floors
- ◆ Poor lighting
- ◆ Low tables that can be tripped over
- ◆ Lack of bathroom grab bars (using towel bars instead is unsafe!)

Given this information about how we walk and what causes falls, it is not surprising that **people with dementia have a greater risk of falling**. The brain is having trouble telling the body what to do and how to move. The brain is also having trouble perceiving or understanding things in the environment. In addition, the body is aging. A person with dementia is dealing with the same physical changes that cause many older people to fall more often.

People with dementia are at even greater risk of falling as the disease progresses. Falls tend to occur when a person is getting out of bed, trying to move from a bed to a chair, or simply walking.

Falls usually happen due to a combination of the environment, changes in the person's physical abilities and changes in the person's thinking abilities.

You can think of it as things you can change (the environment) and things you cannot change (the person's thinking abilities). Sometimes you can help to change a person's physical ability, and sometimes you cannot.

Causes of Falls

It is important to understand the things that can increase the risk of falls. The most common are:

- ◆ Recent illness resulting in muscle weakness
- ◆ A new medication
- ◆ Vision problems
- ◆ Clutter
- ◆ History of falling

People have a greater chance of falling if they:

- ◆ Wander
- ◆ Wear poor-fitting clothing or footwear
- ◆ Have a drop in blood pressure with change in position (sitting to standing)
- ◆ Have poor balance, difficulty getting out of a chair, or difficulty walking
- ◆ Use certain medications or

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TIPS

💡 Use protective headgear when engaged in physical activities such as bicycling, horseback riding, skating, and so on.

💡 Walking, bicycling, gardening, tai chi, yoga and other activities of about 30 minutes daily get the body moving and improve balance.

💡 If you or your loved one has memory loss and enjoys taking walks, wearing a **Safe Return ID** bracelet can bring peace of mind. Call 888.572.8566 or visit medicalert.org/safereturn to enroll.



TOOLS

🔧 The Loan Closet is a program of the Visiting Nurses and Hospice Care where you can find adaptive devices to make your home safer against falls. Call 805.965.5555 for more information.

🔧 Vista Del Monte has a great fitness and aquatic program for all seniors. Call 805.879.5559 or visit sbseiorfit.org for details.

🔧 The Caregiver Center of the Alzheimer's Association provides on-line tools for safety and support, including dementia care training for families. Visit alz.org/care/

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take multiple medications

Things in the environment that increase the risk of falling include:

- ◆ Bedside rails
- ◆ Lack of stable furniture or handrails to steady oneself
- ◆ Floors or walkways that are uneven, slippery, or have glare
- ◆ Poor lighting
- ◆ Weather that causes slippery surfaces, perception difficulties, or heat exhaustion
- ◆ Poorly equipped bath and shower areas

Nighttime fall risks include:

- ◆ Being sleepy or disoriented (person can't find the bathroom)
- ◆ Poor lighting
- ◆ Needing to go to the toilet quickly
- ◆ Bare feet or stocking feet
- ◆ Not wearing glasses, hearing aid, or other assistive devices

There are many things that you can do to promote safety and reduce the risk of falls:

- ◆ Keep people with dementia as active as possible; people who are mobile are less likely to be injured due to a fall.
- ◆ Keep pathways free of clutter and encourage movement.
- ◆ Remove small throw rugs or use double-sided tape to keep the rugs from slipping.
- ◆ Keep desired items and materials within reach.
- ◆ Keep items you use often in cabinets you can reach easily without using a step stool.
- ◆ Use comfortable chairs that are easy to get in and out.
- ◆ Use boosters to adjust furniture height.
- ◆ Equip bathrooms with slip-resistant strips and shower grab-bars.
- ◆ Towel racks, if used for balance, are dangerous. Consider replacing with grab bars.
- ◆ Make sure there is nothing to trip over.
- ◆ Pets and pet items can cause falls. Consider obedience training for dogs.
- ◆ Provide good lighting. Install handrails and lights on all staircases. Use night lights in your bedroom, bathroom, hallways and stairways.
- ◆ Use bathroom signs with words and pictures.
- ◆ Don't put electrical cords across pathways.
- ◆ Make sure there are "rest stops" in hallways and other areas.
- ◆ Use cleaning products that produce non-glare floors.
- ◆ Wear shoes both inside and outside the house; avoid going barefoot or wearing slippers.
- ◆ Have sidewalks and walkways repaired so that surfaces are smooth and even.



How big is the problem?

- ◆ One in three adults age 65 and older falls each year.^{1,2}
- ◆ Of those who fall, 20% to 30% suffer moderate to severe injuries that make it hard for them to get around or live independently, and increase risk of early death.³
- ◆ Older adults are hospitalized for fall-related injuries five times more often than they are for injuries from other causes.³
- ◆ In 2009, emergency departments treated 2.4 million nonfatal fall injuries among older adults; more than 662,000 of these patients had to be hospitalized.⁴
- ◆ People over 75 are 4 - 5 times more likely to be admitted to a long-term care facility for a year or longer after a fall.

Falls happen as people get older because of physical changes. People with dementia are at increased risk of falls because of the changes that are also happening to their thinking abilities. Doing whatever you can to minimize the chance of falls will help avoid hospitalizations and admission to long-term care facilities.

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