

Standing up to falls

Your guide to preventing falls and protecting your independence



Falls are the single most common cause of injury

Many people over the age of 55 are concerned about losing their independence following a fall. But it's not something that 'just happens' as you get older. Many falls can be prevented. That means you can take positive steps to protect yourself and ensure you continue to enjoy an active, fulfilling life.

Preventing falls is one of the most important things you can do to maintain your independence. There are aspects of your health and how you behave – as well as things in your surroundings – that you can change to reduce your chances of falling.

The tips in this booklet are just some ideas for preventing falls.

Find out more by:

calling 0800 844 657

visiting www.acc.co.nz

contacting your health professional.

If you would like more copies of this booklet please

call 0800 844 657.

ACC would like to acknowledge the assistance of the Australian Department of Health and Ageing in the development of this book.

Introduction

As you can see in this diagram, some people, especially those who have experienced a serious fall, can worry so much about falling they restrict their activity.

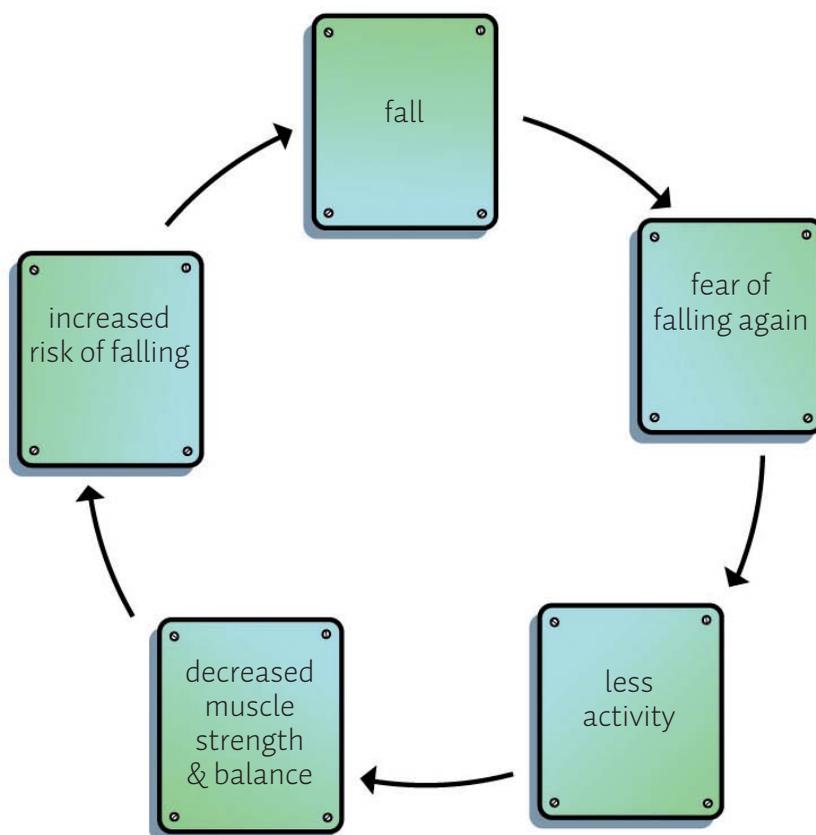
They gradually do less activity, which can actually increase their risk of falling.

The message is: don't give in to it. The more you do, the more you can do.

This book is full of simple steps to help keep you on your feet:

- Manage any health issues that may increase your risk of falling.
- Make your home safe – that's where most falls happen.
- Recognise your limitations. Don't be too proud to ask for help.
- Have a plan just in case you do fall.

There are many things you can do to prevent falls. This booklet will help you to take positive action.



Keeping yourself safe

This first section looks at aspects of health and well-being that can contribute to your likelihood of falling.

It's a fact that our faculties and physical abilities deteriorate a little as part of the ageing process. Usually, the changes happen slowly, so we don't always notice them at first – but that doesn't mean we have to give in to them!

As you will see, there are lots of simple things you can do to stay active and independent.

If you are over 65 you have a one in three chance of falling this year.

Assess the impact of any specific health problems

You may have a specific medical condition that increases your risk of falling. This could be caused by symptoms that accompany the condition – like dizziness from low blood pressure – or even side effects from the medication itself.

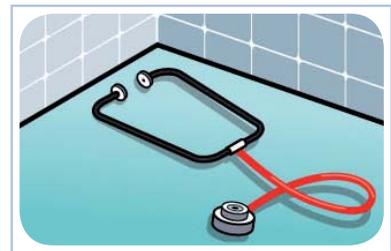
Health problems may affect your:

- strength
- ability to move and react quickly
- ability to see potential hazards
- awareness of your surroundings.

How you can help

Things you can discuss with your doctor/health professional

1. Have regular check-ups. Discuss concerns you have before they become big problems. It's best if changes in your health are addressed early. Sometimes causes of memory loss, confusion and dizziness are easily treatable.
2. Ask your doctor, physiotherapist or practice nurse to give you a balance and muscle strength assessment.
3. Ask your health professional if there are any local exercise programmes that would be appropriate for you. ACC funds an individually tailored exercise programme called the Otago Exercise Programme. ACC also funds modified Tai Chi, which is done as a class in your local community. Both exercise programmes are proven to reduce the risk of falling because they increase your muscle strength and balance.
4. Review your medications frequently with your doctor or pharmacist. Discuss any side effects you are experiencing and let them know if you are taking any non-prescription medicines or natural remedies, so they have the full picture.
5. Always take medicines as directed by your doctor or pharmacist. Be careful when mixing medicines and alcohol.



6. Talk to your doctor about your diet – supplements may be a good idea if you have difficulty putting on weight.
7. Ask about a referral to a continence nurse – rushing to the toilet can increase your risk of falling.

Other things you can do

1. Stand up slowly after lying down or sitting.
2. Eat a balanced diet and drink plenty of water (unless your doctor advises otherwise) – especially during hot weather.
3. Keep as active as you can (see page 5).

You are more likely to break a bone when falling if you have osteoporosis. If you have this condition, talk to your doctor about appropriate medication, exercise or a change in diet.

Remember

If you have fallen more than once in the past six months, you are more likely to fall again. Talk to your doctor about any falls you have. Falls can be a sign of a new medical problem.

*The Otago Exercise programme reduces falls by 35%.
Initial research indicates that Tai Chi reduces falls by 47%.*

Keep mobile

Regular exercise is one of the best things you can do to help stand up to falls. That's because weak leg muscles and poor balance increase your risk of falling. You are likely to walk less if you feel unsteady on your feet, and that leads to weaker muscles and stiffer joints. If this sounds like you, it's time to get active!

Regular exercise provides you with a whole range of benefits. It can:

- improve your balance
- improve your muscle strength and flexibility
- help keep your bones strong
- give you more energy
- help you sleep better
- help control blood pressure, blood sugar levels and weight.

How you can help

1. Keep up your general fitness by walking for 30 minutes a day most days of the week. Or, take three 10-minute walks each day. The activity will make you breathe a bit harder, but you should still be able to talk while you exercise.
2. Check for modified Tai Chi classes in your community. Modified Tai Chi is exercise that uses slow and gentle movements and focuses on body awareness. Studies have shown that modified Tai Chi reduces falls by 47% and offers other health benefits. Modified Tai Chi classes provided by ACC are either free or offered for a small contribution. You can call 0800 844 657 or visit www.acc.co.nz to find out about classes in your area.
3. The Otago Exercise programme is a set of exercises that concentrate on improving your balance and muscle strength. Studies have shown that the programme reduces the number of falls and the injuries resulting from falls by 35%. Your doctor has more information about whether this programme is appropriate for you.
4. Talk to your doctor about managing pain that may be stopping you from being more active.

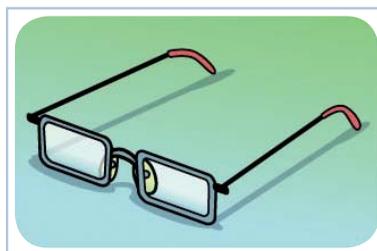


Look out for your eyes

We can never take our eyesight for granted. Our eyes help us see obstacles, judge distances and keep our balance. As we get older, we take longer to adjust to sudden changes in light, are more sensitive to glare and less able to judge distances and depth accurately. If your eyes are less powerful than they used to be, here's what you can do.

How you can help

1. Get your eyes checked by your doctor once a year and by an optometrist at least once every two years.
2. See your doctor or optometrist as soon as you notice a change in your eyesight.
3. Keep your glasses clean and, if you have different glasses for different purposes, always wear the correct ones.
4. Give yourself time to get used to new glasses, especially bifocals. Bifocals can make it especially difficult to judge where to put your feet on steps and stairs.
5. Wear sunglasses and a hat outside on bright days.
6. If the light changes suddenly, stop and give your eyes time to adjust before moving on.
7. Make sure steps, stairs and walkways in and around the home are well lit (see page 11).



By the age of 65, we need three times the amount of light to see than we did at 20.

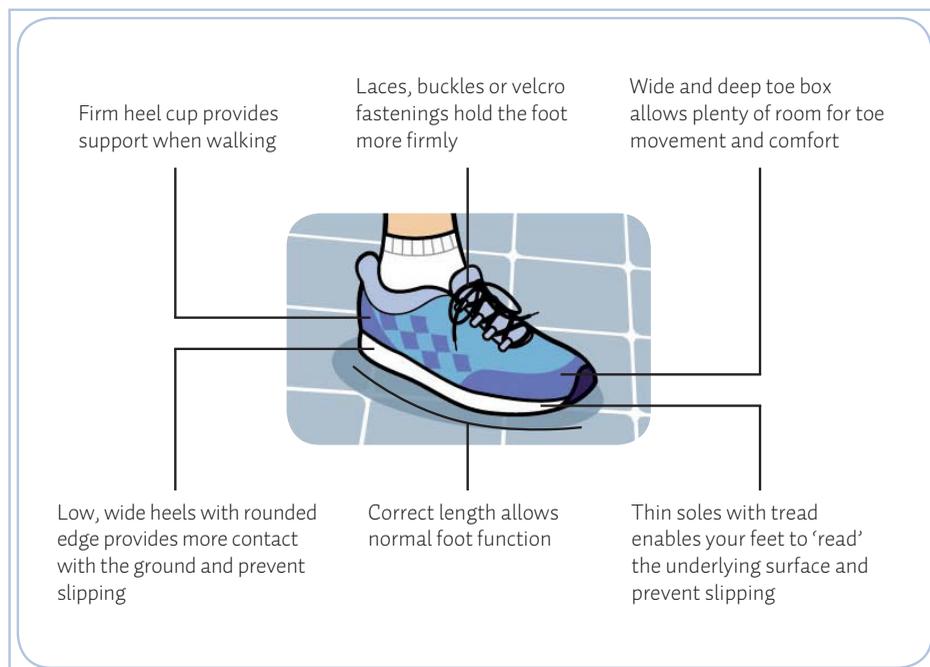
Stand up for your feet

Keeping yourself mobile is very important in avoiding falls. As we age, our feet can change shape and lose some feeling. Painful, swollen feet or badly fitting shoes can make walking difficult and affect our balance. But it's not all bad! There's still plenty you can do to stand up for your feet.

How you can help

1. Wear well fitting, flat shoes with non-slip soles for increased stability.
2. Wear well fitting slippers with non-slip soles.
3. Don't walk around the house in socks or stockings.
4. See a podiatrist or doctor if your feet are painful or swollen, or if you develop problems like bunions.

Prevent falls with safe shoes



Keeping your environment safe

This section is about staying safe in your home and when you're out and about. It covers common hazards and what you can do to make your place safer. There are likely to be changes you can make – like keeping your home in good repair – that will reduce the potential for falls and make your life a little easier.

Staying safe is also about making good choices that reduce your chances of falling. We'll take a look at some simple dos and don'ts you can follow to keep your life independent and fall-free.

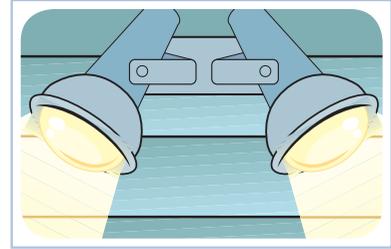
Over half of all the falls experienced by older people occur in the home.

Make your home and garden a safe haven for yourself – and for your family and friends

Light up your life

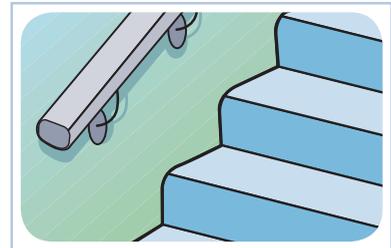
A safe home is one that is brightly lit – especially on stairs and where floor levels change.

1. Install switches at the top and bottom of stairs.
2. Use frosted light bulbs to help reduce glare.
3. Have a bedside light you can turn on and off comfortably without having to get out of bed. Keep a torch by the bedside, in case of power failure. Consider installing nightlights if you often get up in the night to go to the toilet.
4. Have all outside stairs and steps well lit. Install automatic security lighting on the driveway, in the garage and at the back and front door steps.



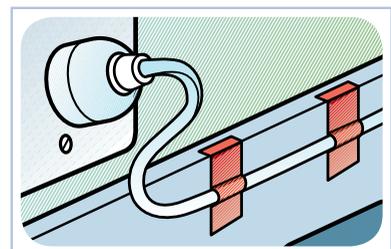
Install handrails

1. Install handrails by inside and outside stairs and steps. Rails should extend beyond the last step if possible. Consider putting handrails on both sides of stairs.
2. Install sturdy hand or grab rails in bathrooms and toilets. Both a bath seat and a grab rail may be useful if the shower is over the bath.



Keep walkways safe – inside and out

1. Remove or rearrange furniture to provide a wide, clear walkway.
2. Tuck electrical cords under furniture or close to the wall and tape them down. It may be possible to install additional power points.
3. Remove rugs and mats that can slide about or secure them with double-sided tape, velcro or tacks. Get rid of rugs or mats that curl or fold over easily. Repair or replace torn carpet.
4. Fit a draught excluder to the bottom of the door instead of using a 'door sausage'.



5. Choose non-slip surfaces for bathroom and kitchen areas, and use non-slip mats in the bath and shower, and by the toilet.

6. Mark the edges of steps with white paint so they are easily seen. Sand can be mixed with the paint to make the surface less slippery.

7. Keep outside decks, patios, driveways and paths in good repair and free of moss and leaves.



Keep things within easy reach...

1. Rearrange your kitchen and storage areas so the items you use most often are easy to reach.
2. Keep toiletries in a shower caddy that attaches to the bath or shower.
3. At night, keep your glasses, telephone and other items you might need close by.



... and at the right height

1. Make sure your lounge chair and bed are the right height for you to get out of easily. Higher chairs with solid arm-rests are easier to get in and out of. You can use blocks to raise the height of your bed if it's too low. A firm mattress provides better support.
2. Install a raised toilet seat or safety frame if the toilet is too low.

Falls cause 90% of all hip fractures.

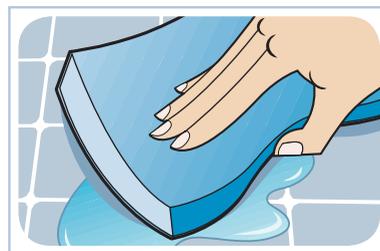
Do the right thing

As well as making our home safe, we need to take greater care of what we do and how we do it.

How you can help

At home

1. Wipe up any spills as soon as they happen.
2. Never use a chair or a cupboard shelf as a stepladder. If possible, ask someone else to reach up for you or keep items you use often in a place that's easy to reach.
3. Don't wear clothes or dressing gowns that are long or loose and can catch on things.
4. Sit down rather than standing on one leg when dressing.
5. Turn the light on so you can see where you are going. Don't walk around in the gloom or the dark.
6. Be aware of pets when you are moving around the house or garden.
7. Put away tools and roll up the hose when you're not using it – a hose reel makes the job easier.
8. Be realistic about what you can do – ask for help when you need it.



How you can help

Out and about

1. Take your time so you can notice and react to your surroundings.
2. Use a walking aid if you need to – it will help increase your stability and confidence and remind others to be more careful and considerate of you.
3. Take care on tiled floors and watch out for wet areas, especially in shopping malls and supermarkets.
4. Take extra care on buses and trains. Ask the bus driver not to move off until you're seated.
5. Report hazardous areas in your community to the local council. Examples include missing handrails, uneven paths, slippery surfaces and poor lighting.

If you are over 80 you have a 50% chance of falling this year.

Be prepared

● It's a good idea to be prepared, just in case you do fall. Practice getting up from the floor by yourself (wait until someone is with you) and plan how you would get help should you ever need it. This will reduce the consequences of a fall and make you feel more confident about standing up to falls and getting on with life.

● Plan to get help if you need it

You need a plan to get help quickly, especially if you live alone or are on your own for long periods. Discuss your plans with your family and friends – especially neighbours. They're your support crew in an emergency.

1. Make sure you can reach the telephone from the floor. It will help if you do fall and have trouble getting up.
2. Make it easy for the person who comes to help you to get in. Leave a spare key with a neighbour, friend or relative who lives nearby. You can also leave a spare key in a combination 'lock box' outside.
3. Consider getting a personal medical alarm if you have a history of falls or a fear of falling.

If you fall

1. Remain calm and assess the situation.
2. Make a decision on whether to try to get up.
3. If you can get up:
 - use sturdy furniture to support yourself
 - tell someone you fell and seek medical help if you need it
 - tell your doctor about your fall on your next visit.
4. If you can't get up:
 - activate your personal alarm if you have one
 - try sliding or crawling to get help or to reach the telephone
 - make a loud noise if you can't reach the telephone
 - try to make yourself comfortable and keep warm until help arrives
 - gently move around to stop one part of your body from being put under too much pressure.

One in five people over 65 will suffer serious injuries as a result of a fall.

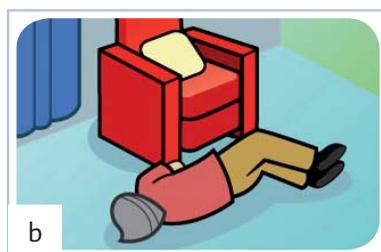
Getting up by yourself

It might be a long time since you tried getting down on the floor and back up again. It's a good idea to practice so you're confident about getting up by yourself. Wait until someone is with you.

Here's what to do

1. Look around for a sturdy piece of furniture (preferably a chair).
2. Bend your knees up and roll onto your side (see figures a and b)
3. Push yourself up so you are in a side-sitting position.
4. Move into a four-point kneeling position (see figure c).
5. Crawl or drag yourself over to the chair.
6. Put your inside hand on the chair. Then bring your outside leg up ready to push yourself into a kneeling position.
7. Push yourself up with your outside hand on your outside knee and your inside hand on the chair (see figure d).
8. Pivot your bottom around and sit on the chair.
9. Rest before trying to move.

Rest at any time you need to. Rest and try again if you don't succeed in getting up the first time.



Women are one and a half times more likely to fall than men.

Home safety checklist

The following pages include a checklist you can use to help identify potential hazards in your home that may increase your risk of falls.

1. Use it to conduct a room-by-room check of your home and garden. Write down what needs to be done to fix any hazards you identify. Skip any questions that don't apply.
2. You might want to get someone else to help you. Discuss your options with a family member or friend. Some potential hazards might look safe to you if you're used to seeing them every day.
3. If you are unsure about what needs to be done, seek advice from family, friends or your health professional. Split the job into manageable steps.
4. Check back through this booklet! We've listed page numbers next to some of the questions so you can find the relevant hints and tips to help make your home – and the way you live – safer.

Living areas	Yes	No	What needs to be done?
Do your carpets or rugs lie flat, without frayed corners or rolled-up edges? (see pages 11–12)			
Are your rugs non-slip or secured to the floor? (see pages 11–12)			
Is the furniture arranged to provide a clear walkway?			
Are electrical cords and wires kept away from the walkway? (see pages 11–12)			
Are all your walkways clear of clutter (e.g. newspapers, boxes, shoes)?			
Is your lounge chair easy to get out of? (see pages 11–12)			
Can you reach the telephone easily from your lounge chair?			

Kitchen	Yes	No	What needs to be done?
Do you have a mop to clean up spills as they happen? (see page 13)			
Can you reach kitchen items you use regularly without stretching or bending too far? (see pages 11–12)			
Are mats or rugs in the kitchen non-slip?			
Bathroom and toilet	Yes	No	What needs to be done?
Can you get on and off the toilet easily? (see pages 11–12)			
Can you get in and out of the bath or shower without holding onto towel rails or taps?			
Are there handrails in the bath and shower? (see pages 11–12)			
Are there slip-resistant mats in the bathroom?			
Can you reach your soap, shampoo and towel easily? (see pages 11–12)			
Is the walkway from the bedroom to the toilet well lit? (see pages 11–12)			
Bedroom	Yes	No	What needs to be done?
Can you get in and out of bed easily? (see pages 11–12)			
Can you reach a light switch or your glasses easily from bed? (see pages 11–12)			
Do you have a telephone in the bedroom? (see pages 11–12)			
Are electrical cords, including those for the electric blanket, secured and out of your way? (see pages 11–12)			
Can you get to the toilet in the night without rushing?			

Stairs and hallways	Yes	No	What needs to be done?
Are the stairs well lit? (see pages 11–12)			
Are the handrails secure and easy to reach? (see pages 11–12)			
Do the stairs have non-skid treads or non-slip coverings? (see pages 11–12)			
Are your stairs and hallways free of clutter?			
Are all floor coverings secured to the floor? (see pages 11–12)			
Outside your home	Yes	No	What needs to be done?
Do steps have a sturdy, easy-to-grip handrail? (see pages 11–12)			
Are step edges clearly marked?			
Is the footpath in good repair and well lit at night? (see pages 11–12)			
Do potentially icy footpaths have handrails or sand/salt to reduce the chance of slipping? (see pages 11–12)			
Personal safety	Yes	No	What needs to be done?
Do you wear well fitting shoes rather than slippers inside and outside the house? (see page 9)			
Do your shoes have low, flat heels? (see page 9)			
Do your slippers fit well and have non-slip soles? (see page 9)			
Do you have your vision checked regularly? (see page 8)			
Do you have regular check-ups with your doctor? (see pages 5–6)			



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