Keeping The Home Safe: Preventing Falls

Falls are a leading cause of injury and while they affect all age groups, have greater short and long term impact on older age groups. Of those who fall, 20% to 30% suffer moderate to severe injuries such as hip fractures (a break in the bone) or a head injury that reduce mobility and independence, and increase the risk of early death. Falls are a leading cause of trauma injuries to the brain. However falls are not necessarily a part of life or normal aging. Falls are by no means a certainty and it is possible for individuals and their families to use preventive measures to significantly decrease the likelihood that anyone and especially an older adult will fall.

There are many simple steps to take and make your home safer with respect to preventing falls. The following easy-to-complete actions can help reduce falls among all members of your family and are especially important as we age, when our balance, lower limb strength, coordination and eyesight are not as good as they once were. Completing these checks regularly will help to reduce your (and your family's) risk of falls and their often serious medical consequences.

OUTDOORS

- Repair cracks and edges of walkways and driveways.
- Remove high doorway thresholds and trim shrubbery on the main path into your home.
- Ensure there is good outside lighting at main entrances and along main walkways.
- Clear walkways of tools, rocks, debris and clutter.
- Check that handrails are not broken and are securely fastened. Both sides of steps should have handrails.
- In the garage, be attentive to and clean up grease or oil spills on the cement. This can make the surface extremely slippery.
- In winter, have leaves, snow and ice cleared regularly.
- Use sand and/or salt on walkways during winter months.

BATHROOM

- Install grab bars by the toilet and in the tub and shower.
- Use non-skid mats or decals in tub or shower.
- If unable to easily stand unsupported while showering, place a plastic non slip stool in the shower to sit on when needed.
- Install night lights.
- Keep floors dry and clean up all water on the floor immediately.
- Remove soap build-up in tub or shower on a regular basis.
- Secure bath mats with non-slip, double-sided rug tape.
- Remove tripping hazards (such as books, newspapers, and magazines) from the floor of the bathroom.

BEDROOMS

- Install night lights.
- Do not use oversized bedding.
- Make sure a bedside light is easy to reach.
- Keep a telephone by your bedside.
- Make sure that you can get in and out of your bed easily.
- Have a firm chair, with side arms, to use for getting dressed.
- Remove clutter around closets.
- Store clothing, bed coverings and other household items where you can reach them comfortably.
- Remove tripping hazards (such as books, newspapers, and magazines) from the floor around the bed.

LIVING AREAS AND STAIRWAYS

- Turn on lights to avoid having to walk through dark areas.

- Pay attention to stairways. More than 75% of home falls occur on stairways.
  - Most falls occur on the top or bottom three steps.
- Keep lighting uniform in each room. Place brighter lightbulbs in darker areas, including stairways.
- Replace lightbulbs that burn out in stairways immediately.
- Arrange furniture to provide for clear pathways.
- Keep furniture in the same place.
- Eliminate or tape down electrical cables in high traffic areas. These could cause tripping.
- Have handrails put in on both sides of stairways. If you have any history of falls, use handrails at all times when going up and down the stairs.
- Fix any loose handrails. Make sure handrails on both sides of stairways are as long as the stairs.
- Remove all walkway obstacles which could cause tripping (footstools, electrical cords, etc.).
- Coil or tape electrical cords off to the side of walking areas and out of the way. If using many extension cords, have an electrician put in a new wall outlet to reduce or eliminate them.
- Make sure spills are cleaned up quickly and allow time for drying after walking on freshly cleaned floors.
- Firmly attach carpet with non-skid or two-sided tape.
- Keep frequently used items within easy reach.
- Remove tripping hazards such as throw rugs and clutter in walkways. Never leave keys, books, packages or other objects on stairs.
- Get rid of throw rugs elsewhere if possible.
- Eliminate uneven floor surfaces.
- Make sure couches and chairs are easy to get into and out of.
- Check carpeting to make sure it is firmly attached along stairs.
- Make repairs to worn or loose carpet promptly.
- Select a carpet pattern that does not visually hide the edge of steps, leading one to believe the steps have ended when they have not.
- Avoid placing throw rugs or scatter rugs at the top or bottom of stairways, or properly secure with carpet tape to prevent slippage.
- Have an electrician put in a light switch at the top and bottom of the stairs.
- Get light switches that glow.
- Avoid the following practices that can contribute to stair falls: hurrying, inattention, obscured vision, carrying large loads, and shoes that are easy to slip in.
- Be aware of all pets, which can get under feet and cause tripping.

KITCHEN

Items that you use frequently, such as dishes and food should be easy to reach.

- Be careful of the handle on pots and pans. Keep handles toward the center of the stove so it is more difficult to knock them off. Use back burners when possible.
- Make sure spills are cleaned up quickly and allow time for drying.
- Avoid walking on wet floors.
- Avoid hot utensils and knives.
- Position shelves so they are not too high or low.
- Place commonly used objects within easy reach to avoid using a step stool.
- If necessary, use a sturdy step stool with a grab bar when reaching.
- Make sure electrical cables are out of the way
- Do not use floor polish or wax that makes floors slippery.

OTHER HOME FALL PREVENTION STRATEGIES

- Wear proper fitting, supportive shoes with low heels or rubber soles.
- Wear close-toed shoes.
- Know and watch for side effects of medications. Have your doctor or pharmacist look at all the medicines you take, even over-the-counter medicines. Some medicines can make you sleepy or dizzy.

- Exercise regularly. Exercise makes you stronger and improves your balance and coordination.
- Limit use of alcohol.
- Use eyeglasses if necessary and keep them clean. Have your vision checked every year.
- Organize your household in a manner that minimizes the need to walk distances when hurried, or go up and down stairs unnecessarily. For example, have a phone placed on at least each floor of your home. If possible, have a phone beside each sitting or lying area where you spend the most time at home. Keep emergency numbers posted at all phones.
- Use non-skid floor wax.
- When using a ladder, make sure its base is firm, that all ladder feet are on level ground, and that the ladder is angled against the wall properly.
- When climbing, face the ladder and hold on to ladder rungs firmly. If reaching, make sure always to keep your hips and body weight centered between the rails.
- When using a stepladder, make sure it is fully opened and both spreaders are firmly locked.
- Do not climb a closed stepladder. It may slip out from under you.
- Avoid climbing beyond the second step from the top of a stepladder and the 4th rung from the top of an extension ladder.
- Learn and use mobility aids as needed.
  - Change positions slowly. Arise slowly from sitting and lying positions. Sometimes one gets dizzy by rising too quickly before blood can rise into our brain. Sit on the edge of your bed before getting to your feet.
  - If you have a history of falls, ask someone to add color and contrast paint or tape to define grab bars and handrails in your home.
- If you have a history of falls, ask someone to place contrasting color strips on first and last steps to identify change of level.
- Install an electrical emergency response system if you need one, and know how to use it.
  - If you have a medical or other condition that causes you to have limited physical strength, it is important that you reach out to family and friends for occasional help.

FOR CHILDREN:

- If children are in the home, use safety gates. At the top of stairs use screw-mounted gates; use pressure-mounted gates for the bottom of the stairs and doorways between rooms.
- Young children should be taught to descend stairs on their stomachs, feet first, and later using the handrail.
- Keep drawers fully closed to prevent them from being climbed on or pulled out entirely.
- Move chairs, cribs, beds and other furniture away from windows.
- Consider installing window guards on windows ground floor and up, unless they are emergency fire exits. Make sure they have easy release mechanisms.
- Consider installing special locks that only allow the window to be opened to a certain height.
- **Never** rely on window screens to prevent falls.
- **Never** leave babies alone on changing tables, beds or sofas. Use a changing table that has a restraining strap.
- When a child can pull to a standing position, the crib mattress should be adjusted to its lowest position. There should be at least 26 inches between the top rails of the crib drop side and the mattress. Toys, bumper pads, and other objects that can be used as steps to climb out should be removed from the crib.
- On bunk beds never allow a child under age 6 to sleep on the top bunk. For older children, if the upper bunk is not against a wall, use guard rails on both sides. No matter how old a child is, keep the guard rails in place on the top bunk since children roll during sleep. Do not permit horseplay on bunks.
- Grass and soil surfaces beneath backyard playground equipment should be replaced with hardwood chips, shredded wood mulch, sand, pea gravel, rubber, crushed stone, or another safer material at depths of at least 9 to 12 inches.
- When riding bikes or using skates, skateboards, skis or snowboards, require children to wear helmets. Look for those that have stickers stating that they meet or exceed safety standards.
- Vertical posts or pickets in deck, balcony, and stairway railings should be no more than 3 1/2 inches apart if

a young baby will have access to the area. The space between horizontal rails or bars, and between the floor and the first horizontal rail or bar, should be no more than 3 1/2 inches.

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