

Seniors' falls can be prevented

One-third of people aged 65 and over who live in the community fall each year. Falls are the leading cause of injury-related deaths and hospitalizations for adults aged 65 years and older in B.C. Falls can lead to fractures (for example, broken hip or broken ankle), head injuries, loss of mobility and independence, long-term disability and reduced quality of life.

Falls, however, are not a normal part of aging. They are predictable and preventable. Fear of falling is common, but restricting physical activity and movement to avoid falls can cause further frailty (weakness). This increases the risk.

What factors increase the risks of falls?

Health factors:

- Frailty: Loss of muscle mass, grip strength and balance, mobility problems, slower reflexes, muscle weakness, poor balance and poor posture
- One or more chronic and acute illnesses: for example, osteoporosis, the effects of a stroke, Parkinson's disease, arthritis, heart disease, incontinence or acute infection
- Changes in mental alertness due to depression, delirium, interactions or side effects of medications, alcohol use, poor nutrition, dehydration or lack of sleep

Social and economic factors:

- Limited or lack of social support or connections, especially support and connections that are close by
- Lack of accessible, safe housing and transportation

Behavioural factors:

- Inappropriate footwear or clothing
- Climbing ladders or using a chair in place of a stable step stool with a safety rail
- For those with frailty or mobility limitations, not using assistive mobility aids, such as walkers or canes, not using them correctly or not properly maintaining the equipment

Environmental factors (home):

- Environmental factors that increase the risk of a fall at home include tripping hazards, such as clutter and inadequate lighting

Environmental factors (outdoors):

- Uneven sidewalks or pathways
- Steps without handrails or marking on the edges, or building design and maintenance

How do I know if I am at risk of falling?

The best indicator of a future fall is a past fall. The more someone falls, the more likely it is that they will have a severe fall leading to injuries.

You can use the [Staying Independent Checklist](#) (PDF, 1,502 KB) to assess your risk for falls or ask your doctor about falls risk assessment and management.

How can someone lower their risk of falling?

There are four main ways that anyone can reduce their risk of falling and maintain independence.

1. Keep your body active:

- Not only does regular physical activity help prevent falls by improving your strength and balance, but it also increases energy levels, helps to keep your brain healthy and improves mood
- Adults aged 65 and older should do at least 150 minutes (about 2 and a half hours) of moderate to vigorous aerobic physical activities per week, such as walking briskly and water aerobics
- Adults aged 65 and older should also do activities that strengthen major muscle groups at least twice a week (such as lifting weights) and activities that challenge balance (such as tai chi)
- Always ask your doctor, [a qualified exercise professional](#) or health care provider about the best type of exercise program for you

2. Have your eyes checked by an optometrist once a year:

- People with vision loss have twice the risk of falls and fall-related injuries, such as serious hip fractures

- Get a comprehensive eye exam at least once a year
- Common causes of vision impairment among older adults are cataracts, age-related macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy, glaucoma and presbyopia

3. Make your home safer

There are simple and inexpensive changes you can make to your home to reduce your risk of falling:

- Keep stairs, walkways and outdoor steps in good repair and free from clutter
- Make sure there are solid handrails on both sides of indoor stairs and outdoor steps
- Make sure that stairs are well-lit and you have light switches at the top and bottom of indoor stairs
- Install a non-skid surface on outdoor steps
- Use a bath seat so you can take a shower or bath sitting down
- Install a toilet seat riser to make toileting safer
- Wipe up moisture or spills right away
- Remove carpets or rugs that can be a tripping hazard. Use only non-slip rugs and non-slip mats in hallways and bathrooms
- Install grab bars by the toilet, in bathtub and shower areas
- Place items you use often within easy reach
- Keep heavy items in lower cupboards

4. Have your doctor or pharmacist review your medications:

- Medications include prescriptions, over-the-counter pills, vitamins and herbal supplements
- Alcohol can affect medications
- If you are a B.C. resident with a valid BC Services Card and you have taken at least five medications within the last six months, you may be able to receive Medication Review Services. Talk to your pharmacist for more information

Other things you can do:

- Make a note of the location of any safety and walkability hazards and report them to your local government
- If you need an assistive mobility device, consult a physiotherapist, occupational therapist or pharmacy
- Wear weather-appropriate footwear with good support, soles which have non-slip treads and are not so thick that you can't 'feel' how your foot is positioned

For more tips and resources, ask your doctor about a fall risk management plan tailored to you.

If you do fall, report it to your health care provider and discuss medical, environmental and lifestyle factors which may have led to the fall and ways you can lower future fall risk.

If you have already experienced a serious fall, consider wearing hip protectors as extra prevention for hip injury in case of a future fall. A hip protector is pants or underwear with pads designed to prevent hip fractures following a fall.

For more information

For information and advice regarding physical activity, call **8-1-1** to speak to a qualified exercise professional.

For more information, visit the following resources:

- Finding Balance BC <https://findingbalancebc.ca>
- HealthLinkBC: Preventing falls as you age www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthy-eating-physical-activity/age-and-stage/older-adults/preventing-falls
- HealthLinkBC File #68j Healthy eating and healthy aging for adults
- Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction: Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health www.ccsa.ca/canadas-guidance-alcohol-and-health
- Exercise is Medicine Canada: Physical Activity for Older Adults www.activeagingcanada.ca/assets/pdf/our-resources/booklet/Physical-Activity-for-Older-Adults-2021.pdf (PDF, 430 KB)

For more HealthLinkBC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/health-library/healthlinkbc-files or your local public health unit. For non-emergency health information and advice in B.C. visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca or call **8-1-1** (toll-free). For the deaf and hard of hearing, call **7-1-1**. Translation services are available in more than 130 languages on request.