



LET'S TALK ABOUT . . .

FALLS PREVENTION

Key points

- Everyone with a balance and dizziness disorder is at increased risk of falling.
- Over 50% of falls happen at home.
- Many risk factors can be changed or modified to help prevent falls.
- Everyone can benefit from doing balance exercises.
- Plan ahead for help after a fall.

Falls are a fact of life. No matter how hard you try, it may not be possible to prevent a fall. When falls happen, stay calm and call for suitable help as soon as possible. Fortunately, you can improve the likelihood of staying on your feet by following straightforward falls prevention and safety strategies.

Who is at risk of falling?

Anyone can have a fall at any time, however children under the age of 5 as well as older adults are at greater risk. They are also more likely to be seriously injured by falling. And everyone with a vestibular disorder is at increased risk of falling.

Why falls happen

Causes of falls range widely and include:

- **Fear of falling** – seniors and people with dizziness and balance disorders may become overly concerned about falling. This fear can contribute to inactivity, disability – and falls.
- Feeling light-headed or dizzy when arising from a lying or sitting position.
- Seizures, strokes or heart attacks.
- Lack of sensation in the feet – this may be due to neurological problems, including Parkinson's

disease, multiple sclerosis (MS) and peripheral neuropathy.

- Tripping, stumbling or slipping – this can happen to anyone, but is more common with increasing age.
- Inattention and not looking where you are going – everyone is susceptible.
- Dizziness and imbalance along with an illness (such as the flu) or post-surgery.
- Side effects of some prescribed drugs and over-the-counter medications.
- Not detecting obstacles at home and when out and about because of vision challenges.
- Hearing loss – if you can't hear someone or a vehicle approaching from behind, you may be startled into a fall. Older adults are particularly susceptible. Hearing should be checked regularly and hearing aids worn if needed.
- Poor muscle strength can result in being less likely to catch yourself in time before falling. Being unable to get up from a chair without using your arms is a sign of lower body weakness. Exercise can improve muscle strength.
- Problems with walking – these include “slapping” or scuffing your feet as you walk, frequent tripping, and problems walking without support from another person, furniture or walking aid.
- Needing help with activities of daily living such as meal preparation or bathing.
- Having to rush to the bathroom due to an overactive bladder or urinary incontinence.
- Toddlers lacking the coordination, strength and balance to recover in time when they trip, slip or misstep on stairs.

Assess your falls risk

A number of tests can be used to assess the state of your balance. These are best done with a health professional who knows how to interpret the results accurately.

- Activities-Specific Balance Confidence Scale (ABC)

- [Balance Error Scoring System \(BESS test\)](#)
- [Berg Balance Scale \(BBS\)](#)
- [Functional Gait Assessment](#)
- [Timed Up and Go \(TUG\) Test](#)

Tips for lowering your risk of falling

Many risk factors can be changed or modified to help prevent falls. Ideas to minimize your risk of falling include:

- Never, ever try to function in the dark if you have a vestibular (inner-ear balance mechanism) problem. We rely on a three-part [balance system](#) to stay upright. If your inner-ear balance sensors are not working and it is dark, you must rely on touch alone. This increases your risk of falling.
- Use a nightlight and be mindful when turning off lights at bedtime. Stash flashlights in easy-to-find places in case of power outages. Mark your calendar to check and change the batteries regularly.
- Make your home safer. Over 50% of falls occur at home. [Tips to fall-proof your home](#).
- Use support to walk if necessary – this might be finding someone to walk with, using a walker or holding onto a sturdy table, counter-top or railing.
- Do balance exercises. Everyone can benefit from adding [balance-specific exercises](#) to their regular fitness regime. You will benefit most by doing them for 15 to 20 minutes daily. Start slowly and build up to more difficult exercises.
- Extend your range of motion. Do stretching exercises directed at improving the movement of joints. Increasing flexibility in your hips, for example, will also help improve your gait.
- Strengthen you- leg and core muscles. Older adults with weak muscles are 4 to 5 times more likely to fall. Doing exercises to strengthen leg and core muscles can improve balance at any age. [Read more about how physical activity helps](#).
- At the gym, avoid the treadmill if you have a vestibular problem. Its motion under your feet will put you at even greater risk for falling. An exercise bicycle is a better choice.
- Include power training in your daily routine. Power is the ability to exert strength quickly. If

you struggle to get out of a chair, start doing chair squats. Power training will help you get up more quickly – it teaches your muscles to fire quickly. If your toes get caught in a rug, for example, you'll be able to react and stay erect rather than simply falling over.

- Get enough vitamin D. There is a correlation between [vitamin D deficiency](#) and falling.
- Stay hydrated. [Being dehydrated](#) can make you dizzy and prone to falling.
- **Choose your footwear carefully.** Wear shoes with a good grip and flat or low wide heels both at home and outside. And make sure to tie your laces before taking a step! Avoid flip-flops, floppy slippers and walking in your stocking feet. [Footwear has an effect on gait and balance](#).
- **Take care of your vision.** Poor vision puts you at extra risk of falling. [Address vision challenges](#).
- **Manage your medications.** Ask your family doctor or pharmacist to go over your prescription and over-the-counter medications: every 6 to 12 months; whenever your prescriptions change; or if you feel drowsy, dizzy, light-headed or unsteady. [Some medications are linked to dizziness](#).
- **Talk about previous falls with your healthcare providers.** Note details, including when, where and how you fell. Talk about times when you almost fell but were caught by someone or managed to avoid a fall by grabbing hold of something. These details can help in identifying fall-prevention strategies specific to you. It can be helpful to keep a [health diary](#).
- **Be aware of other health conditions.** [Vestibular disorders](#) and some other health conditions can increase your risk of falling.
- **Protect young children.** Babies and toddlers tend to be on the go and naturally have more falls. While parents and caregivers cannot prevent all falls, it's their duty to prevent those that might cause serious injury or even death. Essential safety measures include: blocking stairs with sturdy baby gates; preventing window falls by installing locks or bars; making sure all railings are in good repair and meet code as to height and spacing of vertical

dividers. If a child in your care does fall, carefully monitor them for a few days. Watch for signs of concussion.

Plan ahead for help after a fall

If you are at particular risk for falling, or if you have already had a fall, it is important to develop a plan to get help. You may not be able to get up by yourself - almost 50% of people who fall need help getting up after a second fall. Read more about planning ahead for an emergency.

More resources and sources

View more falls prevention resources, including information about fall prevention clinics and programs in BC, as well as sources used for this handout: <https://bit.ly/32UkhLG>

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If you find the information in this handout valuable, **we ask you for your help.** The cause of supporting those affected by balance and dizziness disorders with up-to-date, evidence-based information written for Canadians, needs you.

Will you consider becoming its champion by making a gift online or by mail?

This handout is intended as a general introduction to the topic. As each person is affected differently, speak with your health care professional for individual advice. Copyright © BC Balance and Dizziness. Individuals may print a copy for their own use. Professional members of BC Balance and Dizziness may distribute copies for their own clients. Written permission is required from BC Balance and Dizziness for all other uses.

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