

## Safety tips can help you avoid a fall

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

**H**ave you ever slipped on a wet floor?  
Tripped over an extension cord?  
Fallen down some steps?

Slips, trips and falls happen to everyone at one time or another, and they aren't to be taken lightly. Falls — the leading cause of injuries in the United States that aren't fatal — send about 8 million of us to emergency departments each year.

Twenty percent to 30 percent of older people who fall suffer moderate-to-severe injuries, ranging from cuts to broken bones to head traumas.

Even if they aren't injured in a fall, after a mishap many people develop a fear of falling again, causing them to limit their activities.

"Preventing a fall is the leading way to prevent these injuries," says Judy Stevens, PhD, an epidemiologist at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Injury Center.

### Time to clear the decks

Toys left on stairs, newspapers and magazines strewn across floors and shoes discarded by beds and doors are tripping hazards waiting to happen. A few simple safety measures can prevent many mishaps. Arrange your furniture



>> To help prevent falls, make sure the stairways you use have handrails and that you hold on to them.

so that you have an unobstructed pathway between rooms. Think about the traffic patterns in your home and make a clean sweep of any clutter that obstructs your path, including throw rugs that aren't tacked down and electrical cords. In the kitchen, wipe up spills before they become a hazard.

The smallest room in your home can pose the biggest dangers. Bathrooms are common sites of fall-related injuries. Install grab bars by the bathtub and shower, and place a non-skid rug outside the tub. Make sure the bathtub has non-skid strips or a mat.

### The eyes have it

Good vision is an oft-overlooked tool that is enormously effective in preventing falls, so stay current with eye exams. Multiple-focal lenses, such as bi- and trifocals, can create problems with depth-perception and send you hurtling toward the pavement. Wear single-vision lenses when you go out for a walk.

At home, good lighting can also improve your vision and help prevent a tumble. And go slow when moving from light to dark areas, or vice versa. Give your eyes time to adjust before taking a step.

Many falls occur on stairs, so make sure your stairs are well lit, with light switches at the top and at the bottom of the landing.

Need to go down a flight of stairs to get to the washer and dryer in the cellar? Painting a stripe on the edge of each stair in a contrasting color will make your stairs much easier to see. For added stair safety, install handrails on both sides of the stairs and be sure to use them.

You're more likely to fall if you're barefoot or wearing socks or slippers, so choose shoes with skid-proof soles and avoid high heels. And keep your shoes tied, as many people trip over their shoe laces.

Be extra careful when walking on sidewalks or city streets. Bumps and cracks in walkways and uneven grassy areas can cause mishaps. The most subtle flaws and changes in elevation in parking lots and sidewalks can cause even the steadiest souls to stumble.

### Seniors at risk for falls

Falls are serious at any age, but they are especially serious among older people, who are more likely to break a bone when they suffer a mishap. Osteoporosis — a disease that causes bones to become brittle and fragile — leaves many older people wide open for fall-related fractures.

"Every 35 minutes, an older adult dies from a fall injury, and every 18 seconds, an older adult is treated in an emergency department for a fall," Stevens says.

Older people can protect themselves from falls through regular strength-building exercises, such as tai chi. Also, seniors should ask their doctors to review their medications, as certain combinations of medicines can increase sleepiness or dizziness, which can lead to a tumble.

>> For more fall prevention tips, visit [www.cdc.gov/homeandrecreationalSafety/falls/preventfalls.html](http://www.cdc.gov/homeandrecreationalSafety/falls/preventfalls.html) or [www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/falls.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/falls.html)



>> Toys on the floor can be a falling hazard, so have your kids put them away after play.

### Pet peeves: Watch out underfoot

They're furry, cute and enormously lovable, but believe it or not, your pets can be a major tripping hazard. Not only can you stumble over them — hey, they were there first, so why should they move? — but you can also trip over their toys, bones and bowls.

Research shows that nearly 90 percent of pet-related falls involve dogs, and the folks most likely to have such falls are women and children, probably because they're lighter and smaller and more likely to be pulled or knocked down by a rambunctious tail-wagger.

Obedience training can help, Stevens says.



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