

Please Make Every Step a Safe One

Falling is a very serious health problem for seniors. Did you that: most falls happen in and around the home; forty percent of admissions to nursing homes are related to falls; and that fear of falling and inactivity can lead to the loss of independence? Why do so many seniors fall? Usually falls have more than one cause. For example, someone who slips and falls on a slippery floor may have weak leg muscles and be experiencing dizziness as a side effect of medication. However, the good news is that falls are one of the most preventable risks to seniors' health.

Inactivity, chronic disabilities such as diabetes, arthritic, abnormal blood pressure and changes associated with normal aging can lead to gait, balance disorders and loss of mobility. Regular physical activity and exercise will increase muscle strength, improve co-ordination and help to prevent falls. No matter what your physical limitation or condition is, you can benefit from exercise. Choose activities that you enjoy and make them a part of your every day routine. Things you can do: Talk to your doctor before you start an exercise program. Avoid sudden changes in position, bending down all the way to the floor, and getting up quickly after stooping.

Seniors are more at risk of falls if they take: four or more medications daily (prescribed and non-prescribed); and medications to help them sleep or calm their nerves. Side effects of medications such as dizziness or feeling light-headed can also increase your risk of falling. Things you can do: Review all your medications with your doctor every six months. Talk to your pharmacist before you take non-prescription, over-the-counter and herbal remedies. Instead of taking medication to help you sleep, consider alternatives such as listening to soft music, reading or relaxation exercises.

Devices such as canes, grab bars, handrails, hip protectors and walkers can really help prevent falls and reduce the risk of injuries. Individuals with balance and mobility problems are encouraged to use assistive devices for daily activities. Things you can do: Install a least two grab bars in the tub area. If getting onto or out of the tub is difficult, consider buying a bath seat and hand held shower or getting help with bathing.

Rushing is a major cause of falls, especially to answer the telephone. Having a phone on each level of the house, in the most frequently used rooms, or a portable phone to carry with you will save you steps. Do you make sure your vision isn't blocked as you move about, especially on the stairs? Take care not to trip on your pet, or your grandchild's toys. Turn the lights on ahead of you while moving through the house. If you wear bifocals, adjust your glasses so you can clearly see where you are walking. Be a defensive walker by watching for traffic, bicyclists, and pedestrians. Walk slowly and carefully, while being alert to sidewalk cracks, obstacles, slopes, slippery surfaces and other hazards. Plan your trip so that you don't have to go out during periods of busy traffic, darkness or bad weather.

Finally, know that you have the right to be safe. If you notice any hazards or unsafe conditions outside your home, let the proper authorities.

The Ontario Senior's Secretariat has produced "A Guide to Preventing Falls" that contains useful checklists. It might be helpful to ask a family member or friend to go through the guide with you to

identify unsafe area inside and outside your home. You can order a free copy by calling the Ontario Seniors' Secretariat at 1-888910-1999. Copies are also available from The Friends by calling 1-888-746-5102.