

Reducing your risk of falls



Mater Misericordiae University Hospital



Facts on falls

- Falls are the leading cause of injury in people aged over 65.
- One third of people over the age of 65 in Ireland fall every year.
- Half of people over the age of 80 in Ireland fall every year.
- Older people are more likely to suffer serious injuries and fractures (broken bones) following a fall than any other age group.
- Half of all falls happen in and around the home.

This leaflet tells you about simple things you can do to reduce your risk of falling. It also tells you what to do if you do fall.

Remember, you can prevent many falls.

Here are some things you can do to reduce your risk of a fall.

- 1. Have regular health checks.**
- 2. Identify and remove hazards in your home.**
- 3. Stay active and work on improving your balance.**



General tips

- **Take regular exercise** – this will make you stronger and help to improve your balance and co-ordination.
- **Wear well-fitting shoes** and keep your feet in good condition.
- **Avoid long skirts, dresses, dressing-gowns** or any clothes that may cause you to trip.

- **Drink plenty of fluids.** Dehydration can make you feel weak and increase your risk of a fall.
- **Avoid alcohol.**
- Make sure you get enough **sleep**.



- **Wear your glasses.** Poor eyesight can increase your risk of falling. Have your eyes tested regularly.
- Get your hearing checked and wear a hearing aid if you need to.



- Consider getting a pendant alarm. This is an alarm that you can press if you have a fall. The alarm centre will then ring your family or neighbours to let them know that you need help.
- **Ask for help** to do things that you can't do safely.
- If you live alone, **talk with your relatives or neighbours** each day.
- Always tell your doctor if you have a fall.



When to speak with your doctor

- Always tell your doctor if you have a fall, a dizzy spell or a blackout.
- Some medications can cause dizziness. If you often get dizzy or light-headed, tell your doctor.
- Always take your prescribed medication.
- Get your doctor or pharmacist to check your medication every 6-12 months. Return any medication you no longer use to your pharmacist.
- Have your sight and hearing tested every year.

Changes you can make at home

Here are some simple changes you can make at home to reduce your risk of falling.

- Keep floors and stairs free of clutter.
- Make sure you have enough space to walk safely around your furniture, especially if you use a walking aid.
- If you can, choose carpets or slip-resistant tiles for your floors – you are less likely to slip on them.
- Ideally, remove all loose mats and rugs – if you keep them, make sure they are secure and have non-slip underlay.
- Do not let telephone or electrical cords trail across the floor.
- Always wipe up spills as soon as they happen.
- Consider getting an armchair with a high seat and armrests – it is much easier to get up from this type of chair.
- Keep all the rooms in your home at a comfortable temperature.

Lighting

Never get up in the dark.

- Use bright bulbs of at least 75 watts for all the lights around your house.
- Leave hall or landing lights on at night.
- Switch on a bedside lamp before getting out of bed.
- Always have a light beside your bed that you can reach easily.

Stairs

Use the banisters or rail for balance.

- Consider getting a second rail fitted.
- Keep the hall, stairs and landing well lit at all times.
- Don't put furniture on the landing or near the top or bottom of the stairs.
- Don't carry anything on the stairs that needs your two hands such as a tray or walking aid.
- Take one step at a time.



In the kitchen

Keep the things you use most often within easy reach.

- Keep items between hip and eye level.
- Leave out items that you use regularly such as cups and plates.
- Mop up spills immediately.
- Put away things you rarely use – store lighter items on higher shelves and heavier items on lower shelves.
- Make sure that counters and tables are strong enough to support your weight if you lean on them.
- Think about getting a trolley to carry food and drink into another room.



In the bedroom

Take your time getting out of bed.

- Get out of bed slowly. Sit with your legs over the side of the bed for a few minutes before you stand up – this will help to prevent dizziness.
- Have a light within reach of your bed.
- Make sure you have a firm mattress at a good height so that you can get in and out of bed easily.
- Watch out for loose sheets, clothing or dressing-gown belts near your feet.
- Make sure your glasses are within reach if you need them when you get out of bed.
- Keep a phone beside your bed, ideally a cordless phone.

In the living room

Remove loose mats.

- Use a higher chair or a chair with solid armrests as these are easier to get in and out of.
- Keep telephone and electrical cords off the floor.

In the bathroom

Never rush to the toilet.

- Think about wearing a small absorbent pad in your underwear if you're nervous about making it to the toilet in time.
- Never lock the bathroom door so that someone can reach you in an emergency.
- Use a non-slip mat in the bath or shower. It's important that the floor in your bathroom is not slippery.
- Never use a towel rail to support your body weight. An occupational therapist can advise you about getting grab-rails installed.

Outside your home

Install handrails on stairs and steps.

- Have all holes or uneven surfaces in your path and driveway fixed.
- Keep walkways free of clutter.
- Have lighting installed outside your front and back doors.
- Try not to stand or walk on wet or icy ground.
- Don't load yourself with shopping bags – get your groceries delivered or use a walking aid with four wheels.
- Take care not to trip over your pet.

Footwear and clothing

- Shoes should:
 - fit well
 - have a low, broad heel, and
 - have a non-slip sole.
- Avoid slippers or sandals with no backs – these can be hard to walk in.
- Shoes are safer than slippers for walking.
- **Never walk in just your socks.**
- Do not wear long clothes that might cause you to trip.
- Sit down to get dressed rather than trying to balance on one leg.

✗ Wrong



✓ Correct



Exercises to help prevent falls

Almost all older people can benefit from additional physical activity. Regular exercise helps to improve your muscle strength, flexibility, balance and general fitness.

General tips for exercising

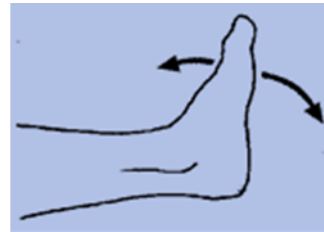
- **Take rests** when you need to.
- **Stop** any exercise if you feel **pain**.
- Wear **good-fitting shoes** which are **laced** with a **back** and a **good grip** on the soles.
- **Avoid long clothing** which you may trip over.
- Contact your doctor if you experience:
 - dizziness
 - chest pain
 - shortness of breath (you can't speak because you are short of breath).
- If you find the exercises easy, slowly increase the number of times .
- Your physiotherapist will advise you on other types of exercise that are suitable for you.

Here are some exercises you can do in a chair at home. Choose a sturdy chair with arm rests.

1. Ankle movements

Pointing your foot up and down

- Sit on a chair with your back well-supported.
- Straighten your knee.
- Point your foot down and then pull your foot back towards you.
- Repeat 10 times with each foot.



2. Knee movements

Straightening your knee

- Sit on a chair with your back well supported.
- Slowly straighten your lower leg. Hold your leg straight for 5 seconds.
- Repeat this exercise 10 times on each leg.



3. Hip movements

- Sit up straight with your feet flat on the floor.
- Raise your knee up towards your chest and then slowly back down.
- Repeat the exercise 10 times with each leg.

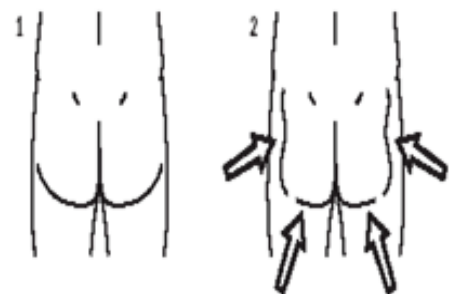


4. Squeezing a cushion between your knees

- Sit up straight in the chair with your feet flat on the floor.
- Place a cushion between your knees.
- Squeeze the cushion while you count to five and then relax.
- Repeat the exercise 10 times.

5. Squeezing your bottom

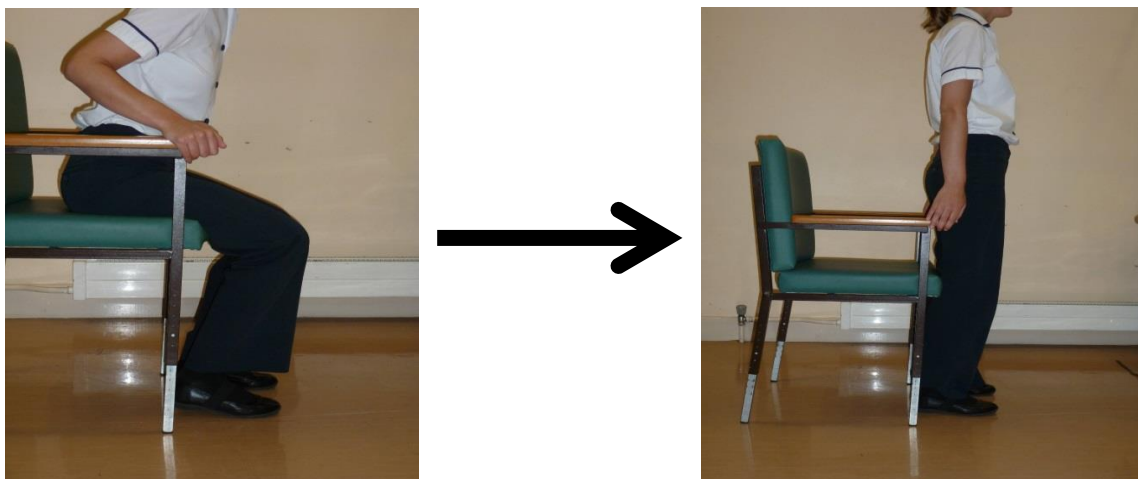
- Sit up straight in the chair with your feet flat on the floor.
- Squeeze the muscles of your bottom together while you count to five and then relax.
- Repeat 10 times.



Standing up

Only do this exercise alone if you are safe standing up from the chair by yourself.

- Sit up straight in the chair with your feet flat on the floor.
- Place your feet behind your knees.
- Place your hands on the arm rests.
- Lean forward over your knees.
- Use both hands to push yourself off the chair and stand up.
- Repeat 10 times.



What to do if you have a fall

If you fall at home, you have two options:

Option 1: Rest and wait for help.

Option 2: Get up.



Your therapist will write below which option is safest for you:

Option 1: Rest and wait for help

If you can't get up from the floor, this is what you should do:

1. Stay calm

Take deep breaths and think about your options.

2. Try to summon help

- Press your pendant alarm if you have one
- Bang on the wall or window
- Call out for help
- Crawl towards your telephone

3. Move to a soft surface

If you have fallen on a hard floor, try to move to an area with carpet.

4. Keep warm

Try to reach for something to cover yourself with. Try to move out of draughts.

5. Keep moving

Don't lie in one position for too long, as you may get cold or develop pressure sores. Roll from side to side and move your arms and legs if you can.

6. If you need to empty your bladder while on the floor, use a newspaper or clothing to soak up the wet and try to move away from the wet area.

Option 2: Get up

1. If you are lying on your back, roll on to your side.
2. Try to get yourself into a side sitting position as in this picture.
3. Turn your chest towards the floor and use your hands for support to get into this position.
4. Raise your body onto your hands and knees into a crawling position.
5. Crawl towards a stable chair and bring your hands onto the chair.
6. Use the chair to lean on for support to push yourself slowly into the standing position.



Useful contacts

Pendant alarm suppliers

- Emergency Response
Tel: 1850 247 999
- Alarm and Medical Services
Tel: 1580 427 327
- Carelink
Tel: 01 843 5889
- Eircom Phonewatch
1850 442 700

Association of Occupational Therapists of Ireland (AOTI)

(To get a list of private occupational therapists)

Phone: 01 633 7222

Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists (ISCP)

(To get a list of private physiotherapists)

Phone: 01 402 2148

Community services (such as nursing, occupational therapy and physiotherapy) are available through your local health centre.

Do all you can to stay mobile and independent and prevent falls before they happen.

This booklet was compiled by the Physiotherapy and Occupational Therapy departments in the Mater Hospital and approved by The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA). Particular thanks to physiotherapists Emma Carroll and Jennifer Gilchrist and occupational therapist Louise O'Regan. We would also like to thank the Care of the Older Person multidisciplinary team, patient falls prevention nurse Juliette Blackstock, Dr Joe Duggan, medicine for the elderly consultant, and Novartis Pharmaceuticals for their support in producing this booklet.

