



# Don't take the fall

## Tips to help seniors avoid injuries

*This column is dedicated to my mother, Carol Clark, whose grace and dignity through a difficult time was an inspiration to her six children.*

– Isabel Clark

**Q:** My husband was recently moved into a nursing home, so I am at home alone now. My children are worried that I may fall and no one will be here to help me. I am 84 but have never had a problem with my balance. Why are they concerned?

**A:** When seniors fall they may have a lot of pain and suffering and even die. Your children probably know that people aged 65 years and over fall more often than young people. Even though you feel safe, you may be at risk for falling. At least once a year one in three people aged 65 years and over will fall. Two-thirds of people who have fallen will fall again within six months. Although most seniors cope with the changes that happen as they age, knowing what those changes are will help you plan so you can stay healthy and keep your independence.

**Q:** What is the risk of falls?

**A:** The Canada Safety Council says that falls by seniors is the No. 1 safety issue for this age group. In Canada, 2/3 of injuries experienced by seniors that require hospitalization are related to falls. Falls are also the leading cause of injury leading to death among seniors. Nearly one in four people aged 65 and over seen in Calgary emergency departments after a fall have broken their hip. After breaking a hip, most people are never able to be as active again, and 50 per cent will never walk unassisted again.

**Q:** Why are falls so common in people of my age group?

**A:** Many changes occur as we age. Our bones lose some of their density and become weaker. Bone loss can lead to broken bones or a loss of mobility. Our eyes take longer to adjust to the difference between light and dark. They become more sensitive to glare from sunlight and light bulbs. Other senses are affected, too. The ability to sense changes through our feet is less, so it can be hard to tell if there is a change to the floor or ground underneath us. Our ability to maintain good balance can be harder. Balance is affected by eyesight, the inner ear, muscle strength, and joint flexibility. When one of these things changes, the chance of a fall may be increased. As we age, the chance of developing a chronic health condition such as high blood pressure or arthritis also increases. This can make us more likely to fall. Also, some medications that are prescribed by the doctor and even ones that we buy over the counter, can increase the chance of a fall. Lastly, our homes have not always been updated with the safety features that are needed to help us stay safe as we age.

**Q:** How can I prevent falling?

**A:** About half of the injuries that happen to seniors occur at home, so making sure your home is safe is vital to your own safety. Stairs and bathrooms are the most risky places for falls in the home. Stairs should be in good repair, well lit, and have solid hand rails on each side. Install sturdy handrails in the bathtub and next to the toilet, and get a raised toilet seat if you are having trouble getting up and down. Go through your home and get rid of the clutter. Remove loose cords, wires

and scatter rugs that you may trip over. Wipe up spills right away to avoid slipping. Make sure there are no obstacles between your bedroom and bathroom. Your home should be well lit and night lights turned on before you have gone to bed. Move slowly when you first get up and never rush. Taking your time allows you to ensure that you are not dizzy and gives you a chance to begin moving with stable balance. Wear proper footwear with low heels and rubberized soles.

Daily physical activity such as walking is important for keeping good overall health. Exercises that strengthen your core muscles (the ones you use to get up out of a chair) are very important. Strong core muscles reduce your risk of falling. Think about joining a seniors' strength and balance exercise class in the community. Talk to your pharmacist or doctor about your medications and what side-effects they have. Medications should not make you feel dizzy or shaky. Eat foods rich in calcium. Ask your doctor about whether you might need osteoporosis screening and treatment. If so, you may need calcium and vitamin D supplements to reduce bone loss.

**Q:** What I can I do to reassure my children that I am doing fine? I have good friends that I can call on if I need something when my family is not with me.

**A:** Most seniors find good ways to cope with the changes that happen as they age. Talk with your children and let them know that you understand the problem of falls and have taken steps to reduce your risk. Your children will feel more secure if they know that you will ask for help when you need it. Regular communication with friends and family will reassure everyone that you are safe. It's important to keep phone numbers handy, and aids like emergency response systems are a good idea, too. Remember, falls can be prevented. Taking a few simple steps will reduce your risk of falling and allow you to keep an active, independent lifestyle.

*Isabel Clark is a telehealth nurse with Calgary Health Link.*

### FYI

For more information on seniors' fall prevention, please visit:

**Calgary Health Region Injury Prevention**  
[www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/hecomm/IPC/ipc.htm](http://www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/hecomm/IPC/ipc.htm)

**Health in Action**

[www.health-in-action.org](http://www.health-in-action.org)

**Public Health Agency of Canada, Aging and Seniors**

[www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines)

**Canadian Safety Council**

[www.safety-council.org](http://www.safety-council.org)

To speak to a health professional, contact your family physician or speak to a registered nurse 24 hours a day, seven days a week by calling

**Calgary Health Link:**

Calgary: 403-943-LINK (5465)

Or toll-free: 1-866-408-LINK (5465)