

# Partners in Care

By Lisa M. Petsche

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## Reduce the Risk of Life-Altering Falls

One in three seniors experiences a fall each year, according to the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. While taking a spill may primarily hurt people's pride in their younger years, falls are the primary cause of injury and hospitalization for older adults. Half of those injured do not regain their former level of independence. Even more sobering, falls are one of the top ten causes of death in people aged 65-plus.

The majority of falls by seniors take place at home during everyday activities. Most often they occur in the bathroom, bedroom or a stairwell.

Following are some tips to help preserve your physical functioning, well-being and independence, or that of someone for whom you're providing care.

### Physical Health

- Get regular medical checkups, including vision and hearing tests.
- Take medications as prescribed. Fill all prescriptions at one pharmacy. Ask the pharmacist about available aids for organizing and remembering to take medications.
- Stay physically active and exercise regularly to help with posture, flexibility, muscle strength, bone mass, cardiac health and overall fitness. There are many types of exercises that can be done from a seated position if necessary.

### Home Safety

In addition to health- and age-related changes, hazardous conditions in the home environment are a major cause of falls resulting in hospitalization. Here are some ways to reduce these hazards for yourself or a loved one:

- **In Stairwells:** Ensure steps are in good repair and have a non-skid surface. Keep them free of clutter. Have solid handrails installed on both sides of stairways and ensure adequate lighting.
- **In the Kitchen:** Keep regularly used pots, dishes, staple foods and other supplies within easy reach. Ensure the heaviest items are stored in the lower cupboards. If you must reach high places, get a step stool that has a high handrail and rubber tips.
- **In the Bathroom:** Have grab bars professionally installed by the toilet and in the bathtub or shower area. Use a rubber mat in the tub or shower, and a non-skid bath mat on the floor. Consider getting a raised toilet seat, a bathtub seat or shower chair and a hand-held shower attachment.



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### General Tips

- Wear slippers or shoes that fit snugly, offer good support and have a non-skid sole.

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## General Tips (cont.)

- Ensure throw rugs and scatter mats have a non-skid backing. Better yet, remove them.
- Keep walkways clear of electrical and telephone cords.
- Avoid clutter in rooms and hallways.
- Use night-lights in the bedroom, hallways and bathroom. Get the kind that have a built-in sensor that automatically turns the light on in dim conditions. Also get plug-in, rechargeable flashlights that automatically come on when the power goes out.
- Sign on with a personal emergency response service, whereby you wear a lightweight, waterproof pendant or bracelet that has a button to press if you run into a crisis and need help. Studies have shown that getting help quickly after a fall reduces the risk of hospitalization and death.
- Visit a medical supply store and check out the many products available – such as reachers and electric-lift armchairs – that can make daily activities safer. If you are caring for someone at a high risk for falls – due to physical frailty or poor judgment stemming from cognitive impairment, for example – inquire about bed alarms and chair alarms that alert you when the care receiver attempts to get up.
- Consider a cane or walker if balance is an ongoing problem. It's important to be fitted with the appropriate type of aid and receive instruction on how to properly use it.
- Arrange for a home assessment by an occupational therapist if you would like more information about identifying potential safety hazards and successfully addressing them. The therapist may point out areas of risk and make recommendations that would not have occurred to you.

## Final Thoughts

While the risk of falls can be reduced through various measures, it can never be eliminated. Pets such as cats and small dogs can be a tripping hazard, for example, and giving them up is not likely to be considered an option.

In addition, there is just no way that a family member or professional caregiver can be at your loved one's side at every minute. You may need to make a quick trip to the washroom or laundry room, go to another room to answer the phone, or be clearing the dishes after a meal, and, in that short time, the care receiver may fall. Even when you have eyes on your loved one, you may not be close enough to reach them in time to prevent a fall.

While bed alarms and chair alarms can be useful when someone is sleeping, they are not a guarantee either. Your loved one may try to get out without the help they need - due to stubborn determination, reluctance to accept help, or overestimation of their abilities stemming from cognitive impairment from a stroke or dementia – and a fall will occur. Especially if the person moves quickly, you may get to them only after they're on the floor. The primary value of these alarms is that they act as an alert, so you can check on the care receiver and provide assistance quickly.

By taking care of your physical health, keeping your house safe and following some of the other suggestions above, you can help to significantly reduce the chances of a fall. Also, by having an alert system or someone in the home, you can react to the fall quickly, which has been shown to reduce the risk of adverse side effects. Although falls are not entirely preventable, there are many measures you and your loved one can take to reduce their probability.