

Church Name

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## PREVENTING FALLS IN THE HOME

Body changes frequently come with aging. These include sensory deficits, declines in muscle strength and coordination, and slowing of the reflexes. Changes in balance and proprioception (body position awareness) are also seen more often in older persons. By rendering elderly persons less able to compensate when thrown off balance, these changes increase the risk of falls. Among the growing number of elderly, falls are a significant problem. Falls are very costly events both in terms of potential impact on the independence of the elderly person and in terms of health care costs. Falls are responsible for many nursing home admissions. However, many falls are preventable. For this reason, assuring the safety of the immediate environment of the older adult is crucial. If the older adult has had a recent deterioration in abilities that affect his/her safety at home, ask the physician if an evaluation by a physical therapist and/or an occupational therapist is appropriate.

### Tips for safety inside the home:

#### General suggestions for indoor safety for the older adult who lives alone:

- Leave a key with a trusted neighbor so someone can quickly check on the older adult if you are unable to reach him/her on the telephone.
- Provide the older adult with a Medical Alarm, such as LifeLine (651-232-3560). Other systems can be found in the yellow pages or on line; search in Google or Yahoo using “Medical Alarms.”
- Provide a cordless phone for the older adult to carry around the home, but especially to the bathroom.

#### Other general suggestions:

- Avoid highly polished waxed floors; instead non-carpeted floors should have a non-skid, non-glare finish.
- Wipe up spills immediately.
- Put non-slip rubber adhesive under furniture legs to prevent sliding.
- Avoid long dresses, pants, or robes.
- Keep electric blanket and heating pad cords out of walking areas. (Use heating pads with caution—only for 20 minutes at a time, on low heat, and never while sleeping.)

**Assure adequate lighting.** The older adult needs three times as much light as younger adults. The light should be evenly distributed because the older adult’s eyes cannot accommodate quickly to changes from dark to light or vice versa. The older adult needs:

- Well-lighted hallways, with light switches at both ends and easily accessible light switches in all rooms.
- Emergency lighting that automatically comes on in the event of a power outage.
- A nightlight to light the way to the bathroom; also a flashlight for his/her nightstand. (Check batteries often.)
- Light bulbs of the maximum wattage recommended by the manufacturer of the light fixture.

#### Remove all obstacles or trip hazards in the pathways of the older adult.

- Clear clutter from hallways—that cute little table could cause a fall.
- Remove all scatter rugs and runners. These create a trip hazard, as the older adult may have a shuffling gait.
- Remove extra pieces of furniture (if possible) that clutter the environment. Furniture items that blend into the carpeting, such as glass coffee tables, can cause falls.
- Remove all extension cords that could be a tripping hazard.
- Avoid patterned rugs, whenever possible, because these can affect depth perception and cause falls.
- Watch for any loose carpet edges.
- Rearrange the older adult’s home to eliminate the hazards of stair climbing, if possible. Can the dining room become a bedroom (if there is a bathroom on the main level of the home)? Consider purchasing a chair lift if one-level living is not possible.

#### If the older adult must climb stairs:

- Be sure that stairways are well-lighted, with light switches at both ends.
- Apply strips of brightly-colored tape to the edge of each stair. (OVER)

- Install handrails on both sides of the stairway (so the older can hold his/her cane in the same hand, whether ascending or descending stairs).
- Check carpeting on stairs for wrinkles, loose areas, and worn or torn spots and replace if necessary.

**Kitchen safety:**

- Encourage the older adult who cooks for him/herself to use the microwave rather than the oven or range. Provide a variety of microwave-safe containers, preferably glass. Remind him/her: no metal in microwave. Also remind the older adult that containers heated in the microwave can be hot. Keep hot pads handy.
- If the older adult has a rollator walker (with a seat), provide a deep tray that fits on the seat to make carrying food items to the table easier and safer.
- Dials on kitchen appliances should be large and easy to read.
- Keep handles of pans turned to the rear (if the range is used) so they cannot be bumped off of the stove.
- Put objects the older adult needs to reach on shelves that are at hip or eye level, not on high or low shelves. Bending down or reaching high for objects can cause falls. (If the older adult tips his/her head way back to look up, he/she can cut off blood to the brain, causing dizziness.)

**Bedroom safety:**

- The older adult's bed should be at a height that makes transferring on and off easy.
- Provide a telephone and a lamp on the bedside stand. Consider installing an adaptor on the older adult's bedside stand lamp which allows it to turn on/off with a touch to the base.
- Eyeglasses and cane or walker should be put within easy reach of the older adult's bed when he/she retires for the night.
- Avoid bedspreads which drag on the floor and create a tripping hazard.

**Bathroom safety** (See also Tip Sheet on Bathing):

- Set the hot water heater temperature to 120 degrees or less to avoid burns.
- Clearly mark hot and cold water faucets. Color-code them: Red for hot and blue for cold.
- Install a soap dispenser on the shower wall so the older adult doesn't fall trying to pick up a stray bar of soap.

**Outdoor safety:**

- Keep pathways and stairs free of leaves, moss, snow, and ice.
- Fill cracks and raised areas of sidewalks.
- Mark step edges with reflective tape designed for outdoor use.
- Use traction tape on stair treads to make them less slippery when wet.
- Keep hoses away from pathways and sidewalks.
- Install motion-sensitive lighting and/or put lights on timers.

**FIRE SAFETY:** The number of older adults 65 or older who die in a fire is two times greater than the national average. For older adults 85 or older the death rate from fires is 4.5 times as great. Keep the older adult safe by following these tips:

- Provide a smoke alarm on every level of the home and in every room where people sleep. Test and vacuum alarms monthly; change batteries twice yearly. (Change them spring and fall when you turn clocks back and ahead.)
- Provide an ABC fire extinguisher on each level of the home and teach the older adult to use it, using this acronym: **PASS**  
Pull Pin; Aim low; Squeeze trigger; Sweep (use sweeping motions over the fire, side to side).
- In the event of a fire, call 911 before attempting to use the extinguisher. Do not try to use it on anything more than a very small blaze. Pre-plan an evacuation route which identifies two exits.
- Safety tips for smokers:
  - Never smoke in bed or lying down
  - Never leave smoking materials unattended.
  - Soak ashtray contents with water and empty them into the toilet before going to bed.
  - Check rugs and chair cushions for ashes. Upholstered chairs can smolder for hours before flaming up.
- Kitchen fire safety:
  - If a fire starts in a pan on the stove, cover the pan with a lid and turn off the heat source. Never pour water on a grease fire. Never leave items cooking on the stove unattended.
  - Avoid extension cords in the kitchen.
  - Do not wear long, loose sleeves when cooking, as these may catch fire.

Here is a good website for home safety tips: [www.homesafetycouncil.org/SafeSeniors](http://www.homesafetycouncil.org/SafeSeniors)