

Exercise is one of the keys to preventing falls

Everyone can fall down. But as we get older, changes happen to our body that can increase the risk of falling. For seniors, falls are a top cause of getting injured and ending up in hospital.¹

Many factors increase our risk as we age. Here are some examples:

- Vision: Problems like cataracts make it harder to do things like safely step off a curb.
- Leg strength: When we were younger, we could rebalance and recover if we tripped on something left on the floor. As we age, reduced leg strength might mean that we fall instead.
- Foot problems: Issues like foot pain, weak muscle strength, poor range of motion in your ankle, and bunions can increase your chance of a fall.
- Bladder control: People who have urinary incontinence might need to rush to the bathroom. That increases the risk of tripping and falling.
- Your surroundings: The environment you live in can put you at risk. For instance, loose rugs on the floor or clutter can create tripping hazards.

New guidelines for preventing falls

Researchers have recently published up-to-date guidelines for preventing falls.² These new guidelines tell health care providers how to assess your risk for falling and what to do about it.

The good news is that there are actions you can take to prevent falls! The guidelines describe how to reduce risks. Some focus on the person themselves, their health and their fitness. Others focus on the environment a person moves in. This article will focus on recommendations for exercise for community-dwelling older adults. Tips on reducing other risks are in the resource section below.

Exercise guidance to prevent falls

The guidelines describe the type of exercise that can help prevent falls, depending on a person's level of risk – low, intermediate, or high.

Low risk for a fall

'Low' is defined as not having had a fall in the last year. The goal is to prevent falls in the future and the recommendation is to follow current physical activity guidelines. By being physically active and maintaining your fitness, you decrease fall risk indirectly through its positive impact on staying physically fit, avoiding muscle loss and frailty and having good heart health.

[Canadian physical activity guidelines](#) recommend doing aerobic, muscle strengthening, flexibility, and balance exercises. You want to build up so that the activities are challenging and keep setting goals to get fitter and stronger.

The recommendation also includes attending a falls prevention or age-well information session in your community. Ask your health care provider for a referral to a fall prevention program.

If you live with osteoporosis, it is a good investment to get advice from an exercise professional. They can reduce your risk of fracture while being active.

Medium risk for a fall

This is defined as having had a fall in the last year, plus having issues with mobility or balance. For this risk level, it is important to concentrate on improving your balance and your lower leg strength. Then you can take part in a wider range of activities safely and with confidence.

Your exercises should be challenging and focus on the balance and strength you need for the tasks of daily life. Look for supervised exercise classes that focus on balance, gait, and leg strength. This is a great way to learn about these exercises in a

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safe environment and ensure you have an effective program.

High risk for a fall

High risk means one or more serious falls in the last year, particularly if the fall needed medical attention. The goal is to prevent falling again with an overall assessment and plan. This would take a look at you as a whole person -- your medical issues, what you can do physically, and what kinds of activity you prefer. If you are at high risk for another serious fall, talk with your health care provider and other people in your life who help support or care for you. Together, you can discuss the benefits and burdens of each part of the plan. When you are ready for exercise, a safe, supervised routine with a qualified therapist is your best choice.

Take Action to Prevent Falls

Physical activities can be changed to suit anyone's physical ability or health condition. So, take action to prevent falls; physical activity is a big part of that!

Resources:

World Falls Guidelines Resources:

<https://worldfallsguidelines.com/resources>

Take this [self-assessment quiz](#) to learn more about your falls risk:

<https://findingbalancealberta.ca/risk/>

Fall prevention among older adults:

<https://parachute.ca/en/injury-topic/fall-prevention-for-seniors/>

Online resources for older adults and caregivers including home safety, healthy eating, and staying active, and vision-related tips:

<https://www.fallpreventionmonth.ca/adults/additional-resources-adults/information-for-older-adults-and-caregivers>

Learn more about specific balance exercises to reduce falls:

<https://www.activeagingcanada.ca/newsletter/active-aging-network/v01-issue005-2021-04-Take-Your-Exercise-One-Step-Further.htm>

Foot health: A ground-up approach to preventing falls:

<https://www.mcmasteroptimalaging.org/blog/detail/blog/2019/07/23/foot-health-a-ground-up-approach-to-preventing-falls>

Foot issues like foot pain, weak muscle strength, poor range of motion in your ankle, and bunions can increase your chance of a fall. Get help from a foot specialist (a podiatrist):

<https://www.podiatrycanada.org/useful-links/>

References:

1. Parachute. (2021). Potential Lost, Potential for Change: The Cost of Injury in Canada 2021. <https://parachute.ca/en/professional-resource/cost-of-injury-in-canada/>
2. Montero-Odasso et al. World guidelines for falls prevention and management for older adults: a global initiative, *Age and Ageing*, Volume 51, Issue 9. 2022. <https://academic.oup.com/ageing/article/51/9/afac205/6730755>