



Fight Falls

A guide to reduce your
risk of falling



About this booklet

This booklet was developed by the Falls Working Group in the Mater Misericordiae University Hospital.

It provides information and addresses concerns that you may have in relation to falls.

We recommend that you use it as a resource to help you identify factors that can put you at risk of a fall.

It also suggests useful links for further information on falls prevention.

If you are worried about falling or if you have any questions about the information covered in this booklet, talk to your health professional.



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Facts on falls

- ▶ Falls can happen to anyone at any age, but they are a more common and significant problem for older people.
- ▶ Falls are the main cause of injury in people aged over 65.
- ▶ About half of all falls happen in hospital and half happen at home.
- ▶ People can fall for many reasons. In some cases, a number of things combine to cause a fall.
- ▶ The good news is that there are many simple things you can do to reduce your risk of falling and to stay independent and active.
- ▶ It is important to find out why you have fallen or why you are at risk of falling. Making small changes, where possible, will help to reduce your risk of falling.

Myths about falls

Myth: Falling is normal when you get older.

Fact: Falls do not 'just happen' when you get older. Each fall is caused by a specific risk or many risks. Falls can often be a warning sign that something is not right, so it is important to discuss any fall with your doctor.

Myth: If I limit my activity, I won't fall.

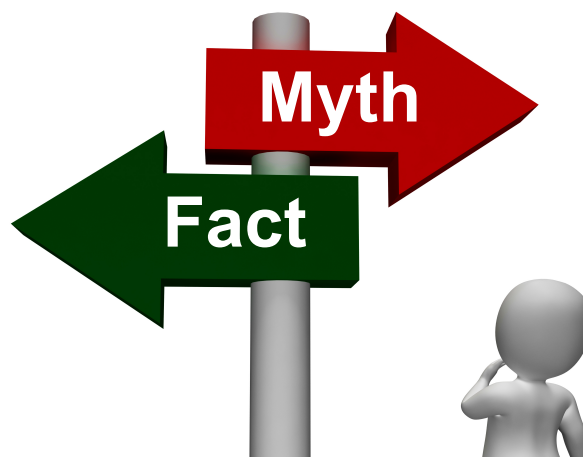
Fact: Not true. Physical activity helps you to stay stronger and more independent.

Myth: As long as I stay at home, I can avoid falling.

Fact: About half of all falls take place at home. Inspect your home for falls risks. Social activities and getting out and about are good for your overall health.

Myth: If lost, or low, muscle strength and flexibility can't be regained.

Fact: While we do lose muscle as we age, exercise can partially restore strength and flexibility. It's never too late to start an exercise programme.



Falls risk checklist

The reasons or causes for falls are known as falls risk factors. There are many risk factors that may cause you to fall. These can be different for everybody. You need to understand the reasons that you may be at risk of falling and take preventative action.

Answer the questions in the falls risk checklist below. If you answer yes to any of these questions, then you are at risk of having a fall.

But, do not worry, as this booklet will give you lots of helpful advice on how you can reduce each of these risks. Read on to see how many positive steps you can take to protect yourself against falls.

Falls risk checklist	Yes	No	See Page
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Are you over 65?

If you are over 65, you are more likely to have a fall. This is partly because of the natural changes that happen as our bodies age and partly because as you get older you are more likely to experience the falls risks listed on the page opposite.

However, it is important to remember that many falls are preventable and if you know your risk factors and deal with as many as possible, you can reduce your risk of falling.



Have you fallen before or are you worried about falling?

It is common for people to worry about falling especially if they have already had a fall. Some people become fearful of falling even if they haven't fallen.



We suggest that you:

- ▶ Talk to your doctor or healthcare professional about this fear.
- ▶ Talk to a physiotherapist about whether you need a walking aid, such as a stick or frame. This can make you more stable and make you feel more confident when walking.
- ▶ Talk to a physiotherapist about how to improve your strength and balance. After building up your strength and balance you are likely to have more confidence in your abilities.
- ▶ Make your home and surroundings safer to move around in. (See pages 27-31 in this booklet).
- ▶ Add the phone numbers of neighbours, friends and relatives into your phone.
- ▶ Make a plan for getting help in an emergency or if you fall. (See pages 32-35). This will help you, your family and your friends feel confident that you can get help if you need it.
- ▶ Have regular contact with family and friends so that someone knows you are safe and well.

Have you ever broken a bone?

Do you have osteoporosis?

Breaking a bone or having osteoporosis may mean that your bones are not as strong as they should be.

Eating well is important for maintaining muscle strength and strong bones and to reduce your risk of falls. If you are not eating well, you will become frailer and be at an increased risk of falling.

We suggest that you:

- ▶ Try to eat at least three well balanced meals a day.

- ▶ Include proteins with all of your main meals. Protein is found in meat, poultry, eggs, dairy and also in nuts, pulses and beans.

- ▶ Make sure you are eating enough dairy as this is a valuable source of calcium, which is important to keep your bones healthy. Aim for 3 portions of dairy a day.

- ▶ A portion is:
 - ▶ 1/3 pint (200ml) of milk
 - ▶ 1 small pot (125g) of yoghurt
 - ▶ 1½oz (45g) of hard cheese

- ▶ Getting enough Vitamin D is also important to keep your bones healthy.
- ▶ Vitamin D can be made in the body after exposure to sunlight. But, it is often difficult to get enough sunlight for the body to do this, especially as we get older.
- ▶ The best sources of Vitamin D in the diet are eggs and oily fish.
- ▶ If unsure, ask your GP if you require a Vitamin D supplement.
- ▶ Drinking enough fluids is also important for your overall health and to reduce your risk of falling. If you are dehydrated, you can become dizzy. Aim for 6-8 cups of fluid per day (water, squash, juices, tea, coffee, minerals, milk); and more than this if it is a hot day.



Do you feel unsteady when you are walking

- ▶ It is common for people who feel unsteady to do less walking. Over time this makes you more likely to fall because your muscles get weaker, your joints stiffer and your balance gets worse.
- ▶ Firstly, address your concerns with a physiotherapist. Once they have assessed you, then aim to increase your physical activity.
- ▶ We have provided exercises and advice which may help reduce your risk of falls later in the booklet. (See pages 22-26).



Do you have trouble getting to the toilet on time?

As you get older, or perhaps due to certain medications, your bladder or bowel control can change. Rushing to the toilet can become a problem that increases your risk of falls.

We suggest that you:

- ▶ Take your time when going to the toilet. If you find you need the toilet more frequently, try to get into a habit of going regularly e.g. every two hours whether you feel you need to or not.
- ▶ Speak to your doctor about medications that have changed your bladder or bowel habits.
- ▶ Always leave a light on in the hallway or a night light when getting up to the toilet during the night.
- ▶ Consider getting a urinal bottle (for men) or a commode at your bedside if you need to use the toilet regularly overnight. Your Public Health Nurse or Doctor can give you information about this.

While you are in hospital:

- ▶ Ring your call bell to ask for help when you need to go to the toilet.
- ▶ Put your slippers or shoes on before walking to the bathroom.
- ▶ Bring your stick or frame with you if you need one.
- ▶ Ring the call bell if you need help when you have finished in the bathroom.



Do you feel dizzy when you are getting up or when walking?

When you stand up your blood pressure can drop and this can cause you to feel dizzy and put you at risk of falling.

We suggest that you:

- ▶ Sit on the edge of the bed for a couple of minutes before standing up if you have been lying down for a long time.
- ▶ Get up slowly and make sure you are steady before walking if you have been sitting for a long time.
- ▶ Tell your doctor if you think your medication is making you feel dizzy.
- ▶ Ask your doctor or nurse to check your blood pressure.
- ▶ Ensure that you eat and drink regularly.
- ▶ Drink enough fluids as this is important for your overall health and to reduce your risk of falling. Aim for 6-8 cups of fluid a day (water, squash, juices, tea, coffee, minerals, milk); and more than this if it is a hot day.



Has your GP reviewed your medications within the last year?

Medicines can cause falls in a variety of ways. For example:

- ▶ Sleeping tablets and sedatives can make you drowsy or clumsy.
- ▶ Some medicines taken for your mood or emotions can make you feel drowsy.
- ▶ Some medicines can cause your blood pressure to drop. This applies not only to blood pressure medicines but also for those used to treat other conditions such as depression, anxiety and parkinson's disease.
- ▶ Anticonvulsant medicines are used to treat epilepsy and these can slow down reaction times and increase the risk of falls.
- ▶ Strong pain killers can also cause drowsiness and affect reaction times.
- ▶ Studies show that taking more than four medicines at the same time can increase your risk of falling, no matter what the medicines are.



We suggest that you:

- ▶ Always take medicines and tablets as prescribed.
- ▶ Let your doctor know if new medicines or tablets cause any side-effects.
- ▶ Ask your doctor to review your medication regularly. They may need to stop any that you no longer need.
- ▶ Ask your doctor or nurse to check your blood pressure.
- ▶ Ask for your medication in blister packs from your pharmacy if you are having difficulty in managing your medication.



Have you had your eyes tested within the last year?

Being able to see your environment and avoid obstacles is really important for your safety and reducing your risk of falls.

We suggest that you:

- ▶ Get your eyes checked by your doctor once a year and by an optician at least once every two years or if you notice a change in your eyesight.
- ▶ Keep your glasses clean and if you have different glasses for different purposes, always wear the correct ones.
- ▶ Give yourself time to get used to new glasses, especially bifocals. Bifocals can make it especially difficult to judge where to put your feet on steps, stairs and outside.
- ▶ Wear sunglasses and a hat outside on bright days to reduce glare.
- ▶ If the light changes suddenly, stop and give your eyes time to adjust before moving on.
- ▶ If you wear eye glasses and still have trouble seeing, visit your GP immediately.



Are you wearing the correct footwear when walking?

As you age, your feet can change shape and lose some feeling and flexibility. This can change the way you walk and affect your balance. Painful or swollen feet can also make it difficult to walk. Also, some shoes or slippers can make you more likely to slip, trip or stumble, leading to a fall.

We suggest that you:

- ▶ See a podiatrist or doctor if you have painful or swollen feet, tingling or pins and needles in your feet or if you have any changes in the shape of your feet (for example, bunions).
- ▶ Choose comfortable, firm-fitting, flat shoes with a low broad heel and soles that grip (see picture on next page).
- ▶ Don't wear poorly-fitted slippers.
- ▶ If you have difficulty finding suitable shoes because of foot problems, ask your podiatrist for the names of specialist shoe stores.
- ▶ Ask your podiatrist or physiotherapist to suggest ways to improve circulation, decrease swelling and reduce pain in the legs and feet.

- ▶ Wear warm boots in the winter.
- ▶ Avoid slippers or sandals with no backs – these can be hard to walk in.
- ▶ Go for styles with fastenings such as laces or velcro.
- ▶ Take care of your feet.
- ▶ Never walk in just your socks or stockings.

Shoes should have support at the ankle to hold your foot firmly when walking

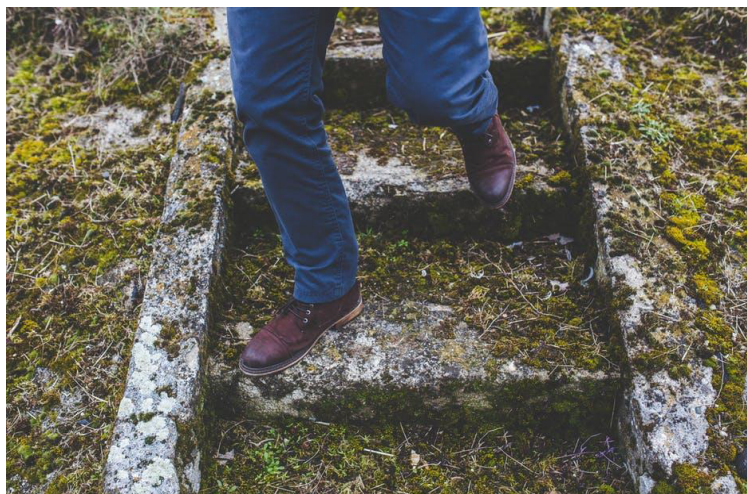
Shoes should be securely fastened with laces, buckles or velcro fastenings



Regularly check that the soles of shoes have adequate grip to prevent slipping

Are there hazards in your home that might cause you to fall?

- ▶ There are hazards both inside and outside your home that may cause you to fall. For example, poor lighting, trailing wires, stairs or steps without handrails or uneven and loose paving in the garden.
- ▶ Making your home and surroundings as safe as possible is another important thing that can be done to reduce the likelihood of a fall.
- ▶ We have provided advice on how to make your home environment safer and reduce your risk of falls later in this booklet. (See pages 27-31).

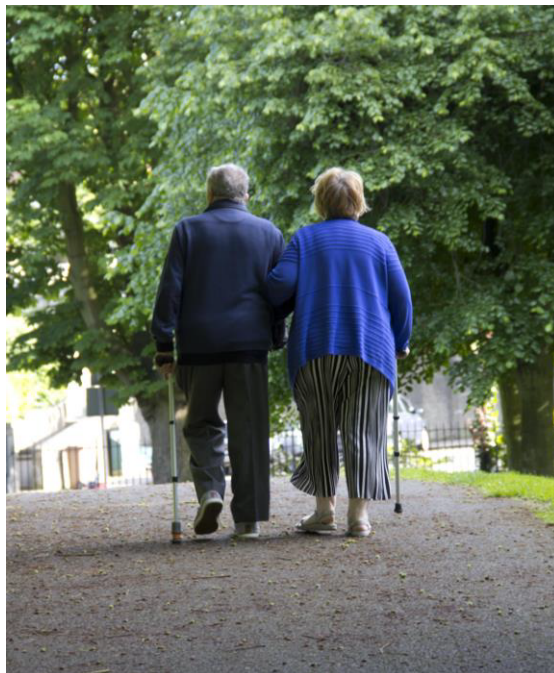


The importance of keeping active

Inactivity can result in poor balance and weaker muscles. This can make you unsteady when walking which can increase your risk of falling.

Our bodies were designed to move. Physical activity keeps us healthy and reduces the risk of falls. It can also:

- ▶ Improve balance
- ▶ Improve muscle strength and flexibility
- ▶ Keep bones strong
- ▶ Increase energy levels
- ▶ Help with sleeping problems
- ▶ Help to control blood pressure, blood sugar levels and weight
- ▶ Help you to feel good about life



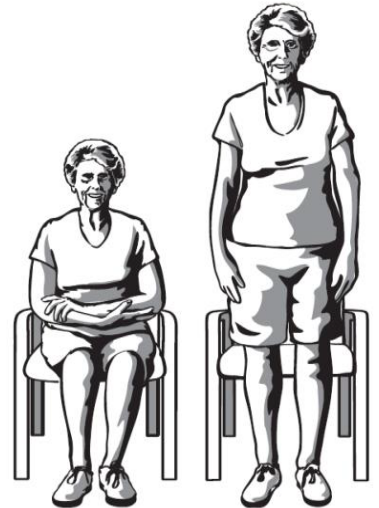
We suggest that you:

- ▶ Be physically active every day. Whatever your age, aim to do at least 30 minutes of activity, at least 5 times a week.
- ▶ The activity should make you breathe a bit faster and your heart pump a bit harder, but you should still be able to talk while doing the activity.
- ▶ Take rests when you need to.
- ▶ Stop any exercise if you feel pain.
- ▶ Wear good-fitting laced shoes with a good grip on the soles.
- ▶ Avoid long clothing which could cause you to trip.
- ▶ Contact your doctor if you experience:
 - ▶ dizziness or lightheadedness
 - ▶ 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 you repeat the exercise.
- ▶ Your physiotherapist will advise you on other types of exercise that are suitable for you.

Exercises to help prevent falls

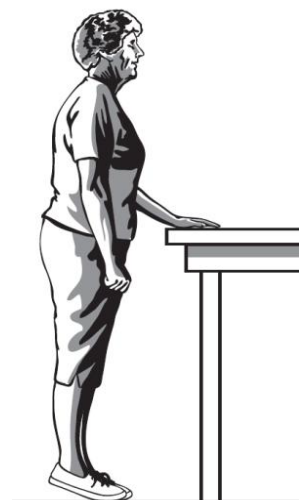
Sit to stand

- ▶ Sit tall near the front of a chair with your feet slightly back.
- ▶ Lean forwards slightly and stand up with your hands on the chair if needed.
- ▶ Step back until your legs touch the chair.
- ▶ Slowly lower your bottom back into the chair, reaching for the chair as you lower if needed.
- ▶ Repeat 10 times.



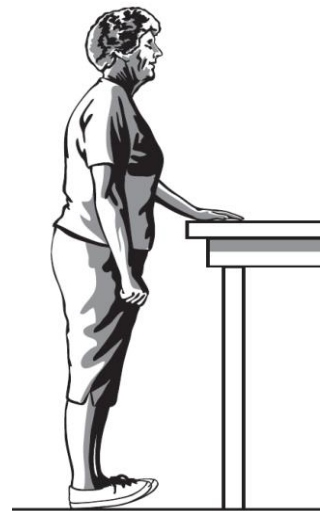
Heel raises

- ▶ Stand tall, holding the back of a sturdy kitchen-type chair or kitchen sink.
- ▶ Lift your heels off the floor, taking the weight onto your big toes.
- ▶ Hold for 3 seconds, then lower with control.
- ▶ Repeat 10 times.



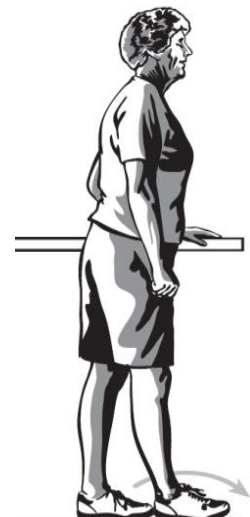
Toe raises

- ▶ Stand tall, holding the back of a sturdy kitchen-type chair or kitchen sink.
- ▶ Raise your toes – taking the weight on your heels.
- ▶ Hold for 3 seconds, then lower with control.
- ▶ Repeat 10 times.



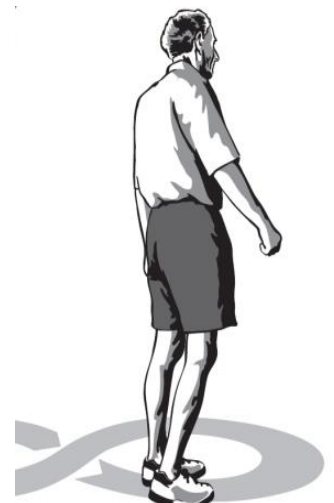
Heel toe stand

- ▶ Stand tall with one hand on your support.
- ▶ Put one foot directly in front of the other to make a straight line.
- ▶ Look ahead, take your hand off the support and balance for 10 seconds.
- ▶ Take the front foot back to hip width apart.
- ▶ Place the other foot in front and balance for 10 seconds.



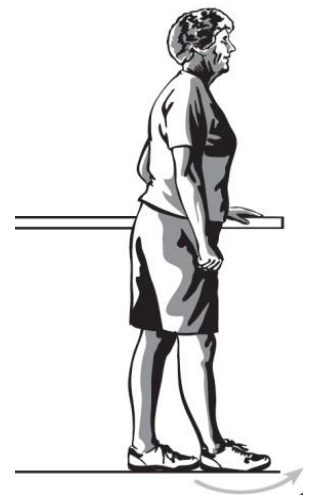
Walk and turn

- ▶ Walk at your usual pace in a figure of 8 shape (around 2 chairs if this is easier for you).
- ▶ Try to keep your posture straight as you walk.
- ▶ Repeat this exercise twice only.



Heel-toe walking

- ▶ Stand tall, with one hand on a support such as a kitchen cabinet.
- ▶ Look ahead and walk 10 steps forwards, placing one foot directly in front of the other so that the feet form a straight line.
- ▶ Look ahead and aim for a steady walking action.
- ▶ Take the feet back to hip width apart before turning towards your support. Repeat the steps in the other direction.



One-leg stand

- ▶ Stand close to your support and hold on with one hand.
- ▶ Balance on one leg, keeping the support knee soft and your posture upright.
- ▶ Hold the position for 10 seconds.
- ▶ Repeat on the other leg.



Reduce your risk of falling at home

Making your home and surroundings as safe as possible is another important thing that can be done to reduce the likelihood that you will fall. Read on to see what you can do to make your home safer and reduce your risk of falls.

Lighting

- ▶ Ensure your home is brightly lit and leave hall or landing lights on at night.
- ▶ Switch on a bedside lamp before getting out of bed.



Stairs and steps

- ▶ Consider getting a second rail fitted.
- ▶ Keep stairs and landing free of clutter.
- ▶ Don't carry anything on the stairs with your two hands.
- ▶ Take one step at a time.
- ▶ Consider buying a bright collar or bell collar for your pet. This will help you to see or hear them more easily and could reduce your risk of tripping over them on the stairs.

Kitchen

- ▶ Rearrange your kitchen and storage areas so the items you use most often are easy to reach - for example, on the counter top.
- ▶ Don't overfill the kettle. Keep the cups beside the kettle.
- ▶ Consider having a stool at the counter so you can sit down to prepare or eat food.
- ▶ Clear up spills straight away.
- ▶ Think about getting a trolley to carry food and drink easily rather than carrying plates or cups in your hands when walking.

Bedroom

- ▶ 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.
- ▶ 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 and walking aid are within reach if you need them when getting out of bed.



Living room

- ▶ Remove any loose mats or rugs.
- ▶ Make sure your chair is the correct height for you. It is much easier and safer to stand up from a high firm armchair than a soft couch.
- ▶ Keep telephone and electrical cords off the floor.
- ▶ Make sure you have enough space to walk safely around your furniture, especially if you use a walking aid.



Bathroom

- ▶ Never lock the bathroom door because doing so makes it difficult for somebody to 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. Consider installing grab rails in the bathroom.
- ▶ Install a raised toilet seat or safety frame if your toilet is too low.



For further information on how you can adapt your home environment to reduce your risk of falling, talk to an occupational therapist.

Reduce your risk of falling when out and about

- ▶ Have lighting installed outside your front and back door.
- ▶ If the light changes suddenly, stop and give your eyes time to adjust before moving on, for example, when going from indoors to outdoors.
- ▶ Have paving cracks or uneven surfaces in your path and driveway fixed. Keep paths free of moss and leaves.
- ▶ Try not to stand or walk on wet or icy ground.
- ▶ Consider installing safety rails on your steps.
- ▶ Mark the edges of steps with white paint so they are easily seen.
- ▶ Don't be embarrassed to use a walking aid if it helps keep you steady and increases your confidence.
- ▶ Stop at kerbs and check the height before stepping up or down.
- ▶ Take your time and don't rush. Scan an area for hazards.



- ▶ If pavements look slippery, walk on the grass for more solid footing.
- ▶ Carrying shopping bags can obstruct your view of the pavement. Consider using a rucksack instead – it leaves your hands free.
- ▶ Watch out for subtle slopes, especially where there is access for bikes, wheelchairs or pedestrian crossings. These slopes can cause falls.
- ▶ Keep your bus pass and money near to hand so you don't have to root around in your bag. That way you'll stand a better chance of getting on safely.
- ▶ Don't be afraid to ask the bus driver to wait until you've sat down before moving off.
- ▶ Find out about community services that can provide help, such as 24-hour pharmacies. Get to know which grocery stores take orders by phone or internet and deliver. This is especially important in bad weather.



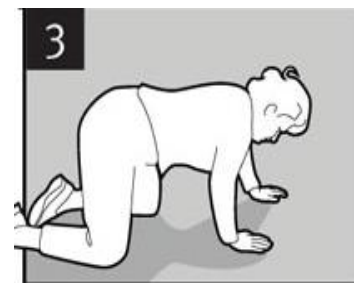
What to do if you fall

Lie still for a minute, stay calm and check for injuries. Don't panic.

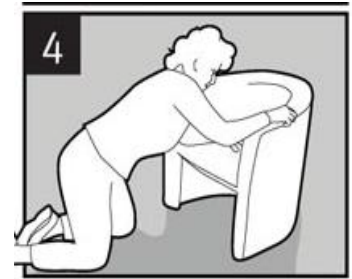
If you try to get up too quickly or in the wrong position, you may make an injury worse.

Option 1: If you can get up

- ▶ Look around for a sturdy piece of furniture, preferably a chair or the bottom of a staircase.
- ▶ Bend your knees and roll over onto your side.
- ▶ Push your upper body up and ease yourself onto your elbows.
- ▶ Use your arms to push yourself on to your hands and knees.

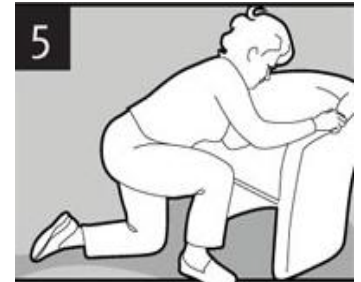


- ▶ Crawl to a sturdy piece of furniture or to the bottom of the staircase and hold onto it for support.



- ▶ From a kneeling position, approach the chair from the front and put your arms up onto the seat of the chair.

- ▶ Bring your stronger leg forward, put that foot flat on the floor and push up off the ground using that leg and your hands. Slowly begin to rise.



- ▶ Lean forwards and push up with your arms and legs and slowly pivot (twist) your bottom around into a sitting position. Do not pull on the furniture as you may pull it over onto yourself.



- ▶ Take time to recover.
- ▶ Rest at any time you need to. Rest and try again if you don't succeed in getting up the first time.
- ▶ Tell someone you have had a fall and seek medical assistance from your doctor.

Option 2: If you can't get up

If you know you can't get up or if you feel pain in your hips or back when you move, stay where you are.

- ▶ **Stay calm.**
 - ▶ Take deep breaths and think about your options.

- ▶ **Try to summon help.**
 - ▶ Press your pendant alarm if you have one.
 - ▶ Bang on the wall, window, door, radiator or floor.
 - ▶ Call out for help.
 - ▶ Crawl towards your telephone.



▶ **Move to a soft surface**

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

Put a cushion under your head or use a rolled up item of clothing.

▶ **Keep warm**

Try to reach for something to cover yourself with anything you can

such as a blanket or a coat.

▶ **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 to keep you warm and maintain circulation.

▶ **If you can reach fluids, keep drinking them**

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.

The main messages

- ▶ Healthy ageing involves physical activity, healthy eating and a little sunshine.
- ▶ Keep actively involved with friends, family and the community. The more you do, the more you can do.
- ▶ Be sensible, and recognise your limitations. Do things safely and don't be too proud to ask for help.
- ▶ Manage your health problems and medicines well. Speak to your doctor about how you can do this together.
- ▶ Make your home and its surroundings as safe as possible.
- ▶ Have a plan of how to get help in an emergency.
- ▶ Take steps to minimise any harm done if you fall.



Useful links

- ▶ To find your local health service/ list of health centres: Visit www.hse.ie
- ▶ For information about osteoporosis: Lo-call 1890 252 751 or visit www.irishosteoporosis.ie
- ▶ For information videos on falls, exercise and bone health visit: www.bonehealth.co
- ▶ For information on the seniors alert scheme phone (071) 918 6700 or visit www.environ.ie (information regarding grant for pendant alarm).
- ▶ Care and Repair: Call (051) 844 844 or visit www.ageaction.ie
- ▶ National Council for the Blind: Call (01) 830 7033 or visit www.ncbi.ie
- ▶ Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland: www.nmbi.ie
- ▶ Association of Occupational Therapists of Ireland: Visit www.aoti.ie or phone (01) 874 8136 to get a list of private occupational therapists.
- ▶ Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists: Visit www.iscp.ie or phone (01) 402 2148 to get a list of private physiotherapists.

This booklet was compiled by the Mater Falls Working Group. This group is made up of members of the multidisciplinary team who have collaborated to improve the management of patients at risk of falls in the Mater Misericordiae University Hospital. We would like to acknowledge contributions from the following publications: HSE 'Falls Prevention information booklet' and the Commonwealth of Australia 2011 'Don't fall for it'. A guide to preventing falls for older people.

stay active!



KEEP ACTIVE

while in hospital

If you keep moving, keep active, keep exercising and work with your nurses/therapists, we can help maintain your independence and also help reduce the risk of falls.

Relatives and carers; help us keep our patients active when you are visiting.

Whether you are at home or in hospital, there is **always** a risk of falling and sustaining a harmful injury, so please listen to advice and help yourself to keep safe.

