



Managing Fall Risk

Why Older Adults Fall & What
You Can Do to Reduce Your Risk

ComForCare and Gaitway

ComForCare Home Care is a trusted in-home care provider with a mission to help older adults live independently and continue to do the things they love. With that in mind, we developed Gaitway, an innovative, evidence-based program designed to educate and empower seniors and caregivers to manage fall risk in the home. Our goal is to help you understand why falls occur and how to take preventative action.

Are Falls a Normal Part of Aging?

The Stats

- One in four adults age 65 and over fall each year.¹
- Three million elders are treated in emergency departments for fall-related injuries each year, surpassing all other reasons for emergency department admissions. Over 800,000 are hospitalized, many due to head injuries, and at least 300,00 experience a hip fracture.
- Falls can lead to hospitalizations, loss of independence and even death².
- It is estimated that by 2030, seven older adults will die each hour due to a fall.
- Those who are more frail and dependent are the most likely to experience a serious injury, fracture, traumatic brain injury or death from a fall than any other group.³

The Misconception

This data may make you think that falls are a normal and expected part of aging, but that is not the case.

The Facts

A deeper look into the numbers tells a different story. Falls are *not* a normal part of aging. Instead, falls are often consequences of multiple medical conditions and/or inactivity during the aging process. With the appropriate preventative action, it is possible to lessen the likelihood of a fall.

Why Falls Happen

When someone falls, it is common for them to blame themselves. They may feel they were careless or clumsy, but, when it comes to older adults, there are a lot of variables that come into play. The good news? Many of these variables can be easily identified and managed with proper education and awareness, thus resulting in decreased risk.

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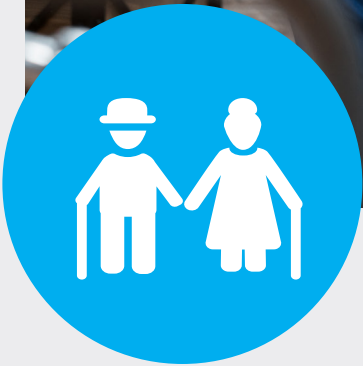
¹ Bergen G, Stevens MR, Burns ER. Falls and Fall Injuries Among Adults Aged ≥65 Years — United States, 2014. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2016;65:993–998. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6537a2>

² Bergen, G. Understanding Modifiable and Unmodifiable Older Adult Fall Risk Factors to Create Effective Prevention Strategies., <https://doi.org/10.1177/1559827619880529>

³ Hartholt, K. Mortality from Falls Among US Adults Aged 75 Years or Older, 2000-2016. JAMA, 321;(21): 2019

Common Risk Factors

<p>Polypharmacy</p>	<p>People with multiple medical conditions often see more than one health provider. This can lead to taking too many medications or the wrong kinds of medications which can result in dizziness, lightheadedness or slowed reaction times, all of which increase an individual's risk of falling.</p> <p>Benzodiazepines are commonly prescribed to older adults and can increase fall risk. Similarly, those who routinely take more than five medications are at a greater risk for falling.</p>
<p>Poor Balance & Leg Weakness</p>	<p>Staying on your feet takes strong legs and good balance. As we age, strength and balance begin to diminish much more quickly. Multiple medical conditions only exacerbate this. For example, if a 30-year-old and a 90-year-old are confined to bed for three days, the 90-year-old will lose more strength, thus increasing his risk of falling.</p>
<p>Cognitive Impairment</p>	<p>The ability to see a potential problem and choose the best action is critical in preventing a fall. Not all seniors have cognitive impairment, but it is estimated that 17% of Americans over 75 have dementia. Such individuals can be easily distracted and have slowed reaction times. They are more likely to move quickly without thinking of safety and may not realize when their environment has changed, thus resulting in increased fall risk.</p>
<p>Incontinence</p>	<p>Incontinence can negatively affect a person's fall risk in several ways. Getting out of bed five to seven times a night is not normal and will result in fatigue, as well as a heightened fall risk. Rushing to the bathroom at any time of day can increase the possibility of tripping and falling, and limiting fluids can result in dehydration and dizziness, both of which increase the chance of a fall.</p>
<p>Diabetes</p>	<p>Managing diabetes can have a big impact on fall risk as episodes of high and low blood sugar can slow reaction times. Diabetes can also cause poor sensation and poor vision, both of which can increase an individual's risk of experiencing a fall.</p>
<p>Nutritional Status</p>	<p>Older adults have higher protein requirements and, if they are ill, higher calorie requirements than younger, healthy adults. Inadequate nutrition results in muscle loss and general weakness which can lead to falls.</p>
<p>Use of Mobility Device and/or Walking Aids</p>	<p>Older adults are often prescribed canes or walkers. While these devices can provide stability, they can also be confusing to users. Some older adults do not have the cognitive abilities or the judgment to use their assistive device safely in the home. For instance, an older individual may stand up, forget the walker is in front of them and trip over it. In these situations, it may be better to arrange the furniture so that it can be used for support while in the home.</p>
<p>Environment</p>	<p>People often believe that getting rid of throw rugs will prevent an older loved one from falling at home. Unfortunately, this is rarely true. The home environment typically needs to be further assessed and possibly modified to create a safe and known space. Any and all changes must be made with a person's abilities and goals in mind.</p>



Managing Falls & Improving Outcomes

There are many reasons why older adults fall. These reasons are called “risk factors.” While falls can’t be prevented in a general sense, there are actions older adults and their families can take to identify their individual risk factors. These actions are called “interventions” and are proven strategies/ approaches that can reduce the chances of a fall.

There are five actions we recommend taking to reduce a person’s fall risk. Try starting with the one that works best for you.

- 1 Understand the Realities of Falls
- 2 Become a Fall Risk Manager
- 3 Manage Medications
- 4 Manage Nutritional Status and Activity
- 5 Consider Home Safety

1. Understand the Realities of Falls

Managing fall risk starts with acceptance and understanding. It is important to realize what you can and cannot do.

Accept that falls are not a normal part of aging. If your loved one is falling, there is almost always a reason why.

- If you can determine the reason(s), you can address the issue(s). Discussing noticeable changes with your physician is a great way to identify underlying causes.
- Understand that not all risk factors need to be managed by a medical healthcare provider. Examples include monitoring the timing of medication doses, addressing home safety issues like clutter and assessing daily activity. These are things a home care provider like ComForCare Home Care can help you manage.

Understand that you and your loved one are part of a team that includes your healthcare and in-home care providers. Your team is ready to work with you to manage fall risk every day.

- If a fall has occurred, it is important to understand the root cause. Think about the previously mentioned risk factors.

Realize what you can and cannot do. Not all falls are preventable, especially for older adults with frailty or severe cognitive impairment like dementia. Some falls will happen no matter what you do, but this doesn't mean you should not try.

Here are things you can do today:

- **Set up daily routines.** This is critical for those with cognitive impairment. A daily routine decreases stress and allows your loved one to focus on the task at hand.
- **Set up consistent pathways in the home.** Observe if your loved one uses furniture for support. If they do and if they are using it safely, then don't move the furniture. In general, try to minimize change in the environment, but consider removing trip hazards such as stacks of magazines or standing decorative items.
- **Encourage daily activity.** You might think this is the last thing you should do, but when people are active and moving during the day, they stay strong. They also tend to sleep better at night which further decreases their risk of falling.
- **Set up motion-controlled lighting.** Any hallways or paths that are used at night should have motion-controlled lighting. Keeping pathways well-lit decreases risk.
- **Work with a PT or OT to evaluate if an assistive device is appropriate.** If so, make sure that you and your loved one understand the right way to use the device and encourage use when appropriate.

2. Become a Fall Risk Manager

Know Your Numbers!

Four Things You Can Do to Prevent Falls:

- Speak up.** Talk openly with your healthcare provider about fall risks and prevention. Ask your doctor or pharmacist to review your medicines.
- Keep moving.** Begin an exercise program to improve your leg strength and balance.
- Get an annual eye exam.** Replace eyeglasses as needed.
- Make your home safer.** Remove clutter and tripping hazards.

Learn More
Contact your local community or senior center for information on exercise, fall prevention programs, and options for improving home safety, or visit: www.stayfalls.org

Stay Independent
Learn more about fall prevention.

Check Your Risk for Falling

Circle "Yes" or "No" for each statement below		Why it matters	
Yes (2)	No (0)	I have fallen in the past year.	People who have fallen once are likely to fall again.
Yes (2)	No (0)	I use or have been advised to use a cane or walker to get around safely.	People who have been advised to use a cane or walker may already be more likely to fall.
Yes (1)	No (0)	Sometimes I feel unsteady when I am walking.	Unsteadiness or needing support while walking are signs of poor balance.
Yes (1)	No (0)	I steady myself by holding onto furniture when walking at home.	This is also a sign of poor balance.
Yes (1)	No (0)	I am worried about falling.	People who are worried about falling are more likely to fall.
Yes (1)	No (0)	I need to push with my hands to stand up from a chair.	This is a sign of weak leg muscles, a major reason for falling.
Yes (1)	No (0)	I have some trouble stepping up onto a curb.	This is also a sign of weak leg muscles.
Yes (1)	No (0)	I often have to rush to the toilet.	Rushing to the bathroom, especially at night, increases your chance of falling.
Yes (1)	No (0)	I have lost some feeling in my feet.	Numbness in your feet can cause stumbles and lead to falls.
Yes (1)	No (0)	I take medicine that sometimes makes me feel light-headed or more tired than usual.	Side effects from medicines can sometimes increase your chance of falling.
Yes (1)	No (0)	I take medicine to help me sleep or improve my mood.	These medicines can sometimes increase your chance of falling.
Yes (1)	No (0)	I often feel sad or depressed.	Symptoms of depression, such as not feeling well or feeling slowed down, are linked to falls.
Total		Add up the number of points for each "yes" answer. If you scored 4 points or more, you may be at risk for falling.	

This STEADI tool was developed by the Greater Los Angeles VA Geriatric Research Education Clinical Center and affiliates and is a validated fall risk self-assessment tool (Rubenstein et al. J Safety Res. 2015; 42(5):481-490). Adapted with permission of the author.

<https://www.cdc.gov/steady/pdf/STEADI-Brochure-StayIndependent-508.pdf>

Becoming a fall risk manager is a solid step toward a more stable future for your loved one.

Your primary role as a fall risk manager will be to pay attention every day. Regularly screening for risk factors will allow for early identification and intervention. Taking action to prevent falls before they occur is an excellent way to improve outcomes for yourself or your loved one.

Five Things to Consider as a Fall Risk Manager

1

Screen for fall risk regularly.

- The Stay Independent screen brochure, available through ComForCare, is an excellent tool to use in this process.
 - Recommended by the Centers for Disease Control, it can help you identify any changes that could lead to increased risk.

2

Know your score. A score of four or more means there is a greater risk of falling.

- If your loved one screens at risk, work with your in-home care and healthcare providers to manage fall risk factors.
 - Taking a collaborative approach with your community providers will help you identify supportive resources as your needs change.

3

Think about ways to decrease distractions in your home.

- This can be as simple as turning off the TV or not talking to your loved one while they are walking or getting up from a chair. Believe it or not, even having a conversation can be distracting enough to increase the risk of a fall.

4

Keep things consistent.

- If you change anything, change it slowly. This applies to everything, from your loved one's daily routine to furniture arrangements.

5

Set up a regular time to exercise, if appropriate.

- Consider a regular exercise program as reviewed by a PT or physician. A simple exercise for balance? Sit in a chair. Now, stand up. Balancing on one foot is another great way to strengthen balance. Encourage your loved one to do so frequently.



3. Manage Medications

Many medications are not appropriate for older adults and can lead to an increased risk of falls and other problems. The rule of thumb is to start low, go slow and avoid any medications that cause confusion or sleepiness.

Per the CDC:

- STOP medications when possible.
- SWITCH to safer alternatives.
- REDUCE medications to the lowest effective dose.

Reference the CDC Medicines Risk Fact Sheet for more information.



<https://www.cdc.gov/steady/pdf/STEADI-FactSheet-MedsLinkedtoFalls-508.pdf>

Be aware of:

- **Too many medications**
 - Taking too many medications is referred to as polypharmacy. Many older adults have multiple medical conditions and often see different healthcare providers to address them. This can result in too many or the wrong kinds of medications. To manage this:
 - Keep a list of all medications.
 - Make note of any changes that occur with a new medication and report them to a health care provider.
 - Try to minimize the number of medications being taken. Ask a pharmacist if they are all necessary.
- **The wrong kinds of medication**
 - Some medications should not be prescribed to older adults as they can increase the risk of a fall. These can include medications that help with:
 - Sleep (sedatives)
 - Mood (antidepressants)
 - Pain (prescription pain medications, opioids)
 - Anxiety (benzodiazepines, anti-psychotics)

- These medications are often prescribed to middle-aged adults and do not have the same negative impact. As we age, our bodies process these medications very differently. The same dose a person takes at 45 will have almost twice the impact at age 65.
- If your older loved one is taking a medication from the categories listed above, reach out to a doctor. Ask if this is the best medication and if there are any alternatives. Alternatives could be a different medication, a change in activity or practicing meditation and mindfulness.
- **Over-the-counter medications**
 - Many non-prescription medications can increase the risk of a fall, and often, these medications aren't tested on older adults. Because of this, it's important to bring over-the-counter medications and supplements when discussing medications with a pharmacist or doctor.
 - Tylenol PM, Dramamine and Benadryl are linked to a higher risk of falls as they slow thinking and reaction times.
- **Vitamin D and calcium¹**
 - Vitamin D is a vitamin our bodies make with the help of the sun. As we get older, our skin changes and we tend to spend less time outdoors. Because of this, we do not make vitamin D as efficiently.
 - Vitamin D plays an important role in keeping muscles and bones strong as you age. It can also help with your mood.
 - Believe it or not, older adults, even those who are frail or weak, will develop stronger muscles and fall less with adequate levels of vitamin D².
 - Studies support that taking a daily dose of vitamin D can help improve osteoporosis, a condition that leads to brittle, weak bones³. Taking vitamin D in combination with calcium can enhance its positive effects.
 - Consult a physician to determine your loved one's recommended daily dose of vitamin D and calcium.



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4. Manage Nutritional Status and Activity

As we age, we must manage nutrition to help keep our bodies strong. The better we eat, the more energy we'll have to engage in the activities that keep us strong and steady on our feet. Unfortunately, older adults are particularly vulnerable to nutritional issues as aging can bring along changes in appetite and food intake.

Early satiation, diminished taste and smell, lifestyle changes, medical conditions and changes in the home environment can all contribute to reduced food intake. Older adults actually need more protein than those under 65. Without enough protein, a person can become undernourished, which can lead to weakness, frailty, adverse health and an increased risk of falls.^{1,2}

Nutritional Status

- Make sure there is enough protein in your diet. If you have questions, you can talk to a registered dietitian as part of Medicare or a Medicare Advantage plan. You can also access community resources. Some insurance providers will even help with access to fresh, healthy foods.
- Use MyPlate as a guide to help in understanding your daily nutritional requirements.
 - MyPlate for Older Adults <https://www.choosemyplate.gov/>
- Eat small meals throughout the day.
- Stay hydrated!
 - Limiting fluids for any reason, whether due to illness, lack of thirst or choice, will put a person at risk of dehydration.
 - Dehydration can cause confusion, dizziness and falls.
 - Dehydration can also increase the risk of urinary tract infections which can also cause falls.
 - Drink a minimum of 50 fluid oz. (6 to 7 glasses) of non-caffeinated fluids each day.³



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Activity

Sometimes, people think if they move less then they will experience fewer falls, but the opposite is true. The more we sit, the weaker our legs become, and the more likely we are to experience a fall due to weakness and poor balance. In fact, weak legs and difficulty walking are some of the top reasons why older adults fall.¹

Older adults who participate in regular exercise, particularly exercise that challenges balance, experience a protective effect against a fall. In research studies, these individuals fell 21% less than older adults who did not exercise.² The effect was found in individuals of all age groups and all levels of ability, including those who were frail. It's possible to build leg strength and improve balance at any age, even at over 100 years old!

Ideal Exercises

- Exercises should focus on leg strength and balance.
- Exercises should be done in standing positions if at all possible.
- Find ways to incorporate activity into the day such as doing squats while unloading the dishwasher or standing on one foot at the kitchen counter.

Exercise Tips

- Start slow. Have your loved one try standing up from their chair without using their arms. Doing this a few times in a row is a simple way to work on strength and balance.
- Practice walking around the house for 5 minutes without taking a break. Then, increase the time.
- The goal is to work up to 3 hours of strength and balance exercises per week. These can be done in the home as part of your loved one's daily routine.
- As these activities become easier, look into programs available in your community and online. That way, your loved one can continue to improve.

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5. Consider Home Safety

Home is one of the safest places to be, however, it's important to continually monitor for fall risk factors and make minor modifications. Consider the following.

- **Use walking aids correctly.**
 - Just because your loved one looks unstable does not mean they need a cane or a walker. Only use a walking aid if a healthcare professional has evaluated your loved one, recommends an aid, and trains both you and your loved one to use it properly. If you have done this and you notice that your loved one often forgets to use the aid or trips over it, contact your provider for another assessment.
- **Complete a home safety checklist with ComForCare.**
 - A complimentary comprehensive checklist will be completed to ensure you are considering all areas of the home that could be modified for greater safety. ComForCare can assist in identifying potentially problematic areas and coordinate a handyman service if needed.
- **Keep your home environment fall-proof.**
 - Kitchen
 - Are daily use items within reach? Make sure that ladders, chairs and stools are not necessary.
 - Bathrooms
 - Create a clear pathway to the toilet and shower.
 - Grab bars near toilets, tubs and showers can be useful.
 - Bedroom
 - Consider the height of the bed. Is it easy to get in and out?
 - Are lights easily within reach? Could they be automated with a device like Alexa?
 - Pathways
 - Consider handrails on both sides of the stairs.
 - Ensure that there is good lighting.
 - Clear halls and walkways of any items that could trip someone.
 - Keep cords and wires out of the way.
 - Outdoor
 - Are there uneven surfaces that could lead to a fall? Check curbs and doors.

Summary

We realize this might be a lot to take in. If you're wondering whether your loved one could benefit from a fall risk assessment with the support of an in-home care professional, consider the following questions.

1. Has your loved one fallen in the past year?
2. Are they taking medications that make them dizzy or sleepy?
3. Could home modifications such as grab bars make their home life safer?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, you could benefit from in-home care.

In-home care services start with a health assessment that helps our clinician develop a care plan. We understand that health care needs change frequently in older adults, which is why we continually reassess and adjust our approach and recommendations accordingly.

Trying to manage care on your own is a challenge. Instead, work with your community in-home care provider, ComForCare. We can assist with fall risk screenings, home modifications, and the coordination of resources, not to mention provide supportive care so your loved one can remain safe and independent.



How ComForCare Home Care Can Help

As you learn your new role as a fall risk manager, working with ComForCare and our trained caregivers can make it easier to manage your loved one's fall risk.

Home care can also help drive down your overall medical expense and improve wellness. We take a team approach to continuously monitor changes in condition. This allows us to intervene sooner which can help avoid an admission or readmission due to a fall.

We are successful at this when we are in the home supporting your loved one.

ComForCare will help you manage fall risk by:

- Completing a fall risk screening and home safety evaluation
- Taking the time to educate you and your loved one on fall risk factors
- Completing a comprehensive assessment to identify and manage unique factors
- Creating an individualized care plan to meet your needs
- Providing safe standby assistance
- Continuously monitoring of conditions and reporting for early interventions
- Having caregivers continuously observe for changes and report
- Encouraging clients to engage in strength and balance exercises as prescribed
- Preparing meals and helping make choices to improve nutrition
- Encouraging fluids to maintain hydration
- Engaging in an appropriate mobility plan
- Managing medications daily
- Connecting you with the right community resources

Did you know that caring for an older adult alone can lead to burnout? Burnout is serious but accepting support from a home care agency can reduce the its effects. Caregiving is a team sport. We're on your team.

Call today to experience the positive impact of Gaitway.

