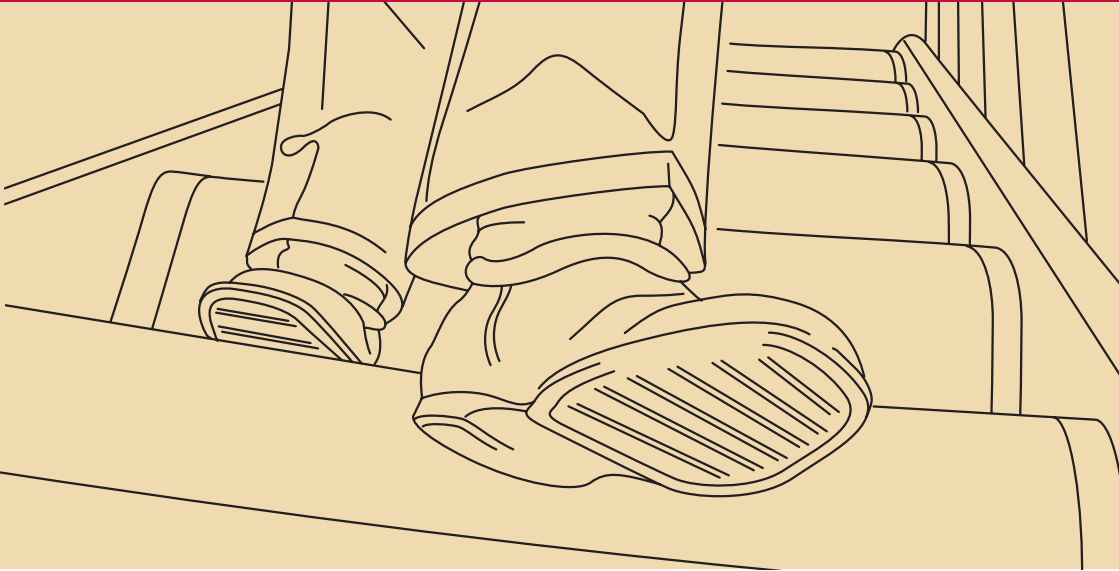


Staying Steady



Improving your strength and balance

Advice for older people

Endorsed by



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Leaflets are free of charge and available from the Information Resources Team at the address on the back page, email advicleaflets@helptheaged.org.uk or fax 0870 770 3282.

The advice given in this leaflet is endorsed by the British Geriatrics Society (BGS). The BGS is the only professional association, in the UK, of doctors practising geriatric medicine.

If you would like this leaflet in another format, such as large print or audio tape, please contact the Information Resources Team on **020 7278 1114**.

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There are many simple things that you can do to stay steady on your feet. This leaflet has information and advice for everyone, whether you're fit and active, have mobility problems, or are worried about falling.

As well as practical advice on how you can improve your strength, balance and mobility, this leaflet looks at the impact that anxiety about falling can have on people's lives. It also tells you about the help you should be able to get if you need it.

Practical advice

General health and well-being can make a big difference to your quality of life, whatever your age. Eating well, keeping fit, looking after your bones and looking after your feet are all important. But there are also specific things that you can do to keep your balance. We look at what you can do in this section.

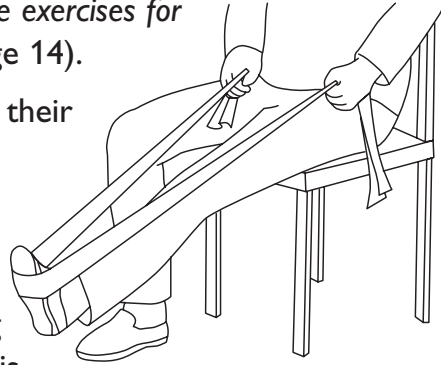
Taking positive action to stay steady on your feet does not mean you have to place restrictions on everything you do. In fact, it should allow you to be more active and give you greater freedom and confidence. Nobody wants to think of themselves or be seen by others as someone who might fall. But remember, the purpose of taking steps to stay steady and prevent falls is to protect and improve your health, mobility and independence – not to take it away.

Improving your strength and balance

Walking, gardening, dancing and aerobic classes are all good ways to keep fit and healthy. But there are also specific exercises you can do to improve your strength and balance. See our home

exercise booklet, *Strength and balance exercises for healthy ageing* (contact details on page 14).

Everyone can benefit from improving their strength and balance. Exercises to strengthen the muscles of your legs and body and to improve your co-ordination and balance are known as balance training. As well as increasing your general fitness, balance training is one of the most effective ways to reduce the risk of falling.



Exercises are often suitable for people who don't feel able to do more active things like dancing or gardening. In fact, balance training is especially important if you have problems due to illness, such as joint pain, weakness or feeling dizzy or unsteady. Balance training can help you get back to normal and overcome feelings of stiffness or unsteadiness. If you have difficulty getting around, it can make it easier for you to get out and about without needing support or someone with you all the time.

You can fit balance training into your daily life by carrying out simple exercises at home as and when it suits you. Or you may prefer to join a group at a local centre, where a professional can advise you. This will also give you the opportunity to get to know people, learn from others, and use special training equipment or play sports. To find out about balance training classes in your local area, ask at your local library, health centre, leisure centre or local Age Concern group.

As with any exercise, take it gently at first and build up slowly. Always begin with a warm-up to prepare your body and finish by warming-down. If you're not used to taking physical exercise, speak to your doctor first. If you experience chest pain or feel faint you should stop exercising and contact your doctor.

Most people find that balance training is easier than they expected – and more enjoyable. You may be surprised by how much you can achieve.

You can talk to your doctor about how to get the most out of strength and balance training. You will benefit most from an exercise programme specially designed to meet your needs. This is especially important if you have had a fall or are at all unsteady on your feet. For more information on help which is available, see page 11, Help from the NHS.

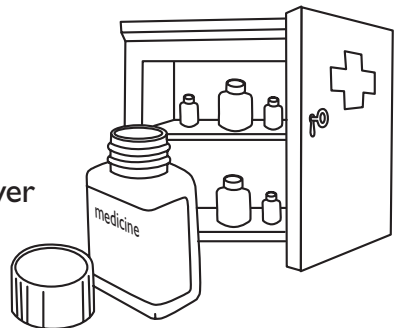
Don't give up on exercising just because you have had a fall or are afraid of falling. Reducing your physical activity can actually make you more prone to falling!

Checking your eyesight

Your vision plays an important role in your sense of balance and movement. It is a good idea to have your eyes checked regularly – at least every two years. Eye tests are free if you are aged 60 or over. If you are on a low income you may also get help with the cost of glasses. See our free advice leaflet, *Better Sight*, for advice on eye care. Remember that reading glasses or bifocal or varifocal lenses can make objects and surfaces appear closer than they really are. This could cause you to trip or lose your balance, particularly on stairs. If you think this could be a problem for you, ask your optician for advice.

Managing your medicines

Some medicines can make you faint or unsteady. Let your doctor know if you ever feel like this after taking medication. They may want to change the dose or



the medicine. If you take more than four kinds of medicine, ask your doctor or pharmacist to check them for you regularly. You may find it useful to read our free advice leaflet, *Managing Your Medicines*.

It is important you get a flu jab every winter. Flu can make you unsteady on your feet. Ask your doctor when flu jabs will be available each year.

Checking your home environment

Keeping an eye out for things that could cause you to slip or trip can make your home a safer place to live. Most of these tips are common sense. You may well have thought about them already. But it's worth looking at them again as a reminder or in case your situation has changed. Making just a small adjustment can make things easier.

- Good lighting is very important, particularly on the stairs. If you need to get up in the night, switch on a light to make sure you can see where you are going.
- Handrails fitted to your stairs can make them easier and safer to climb.
- If you are having difficulties moving around your home, would it help to rearrange your furniture so you are less likely to bump into things? If you need to use your furniture for support, you should get advice from an occupational therapist – see page 11, Help from the NHS.
- Remember to keep the floor clear of trailing flexes, rucked-up or fraying carpets or anything else you might trip over or slip on.
- Although pets can be great companions, they can also get under your feet. Think about giving your pet a brightly coloured collar or a bell so that you will notice it more easily.

- Make sure your stairs and steps are free of clutter. Many people leave things on their stairs with the intention of taking them up or down later on. You can avoid doing this by finding somewhere else to store the item until you need to move it.
- A non-slip mat in the bath and a well-placed handrail can help you keep your balance when you are getting in and out of the bath. You can also place non-slip mats under rugs, in the kitchen, on stair landings and next to the bath.
- Some people can feel faint or light-headed when getting out of bed or up from a chair. This is because your blood pressure can drop suddenly if you stand up too quickly. Medication can do this too, so do mention it to your doctor when you have your prescription renewed. Avoid this happening by taking your time to get up, moving slowly and doing it in stages. Tensing your arms and legs a few times before you get up can help. When you're getting out of bed, sit on the edge for a minute or so before standing up.
- Avoid standing on a chair to change a light bulb or put up curtains. It is safer to use a stepladder or ask someone to help you.
- Raising your arms and tipping your head back, for example to clean windows or change a light bulb, can make some people light-headed and dizzy. If this happens to you, avoid this sort of task and ask for help. If you have arthritis in your spine or neck remember to move your head slowly to avoid dizziness.
- In the garden, watch out for uneven paths and slippery surfaces and keep paths clear. Carefully placed handrails and posts can be helpful if you need them.
- Keep warm. Cold muscles work less well and may lead to accidents and injuries.

Making small adjustments in your daily life doesn't mean that you have to limit your activities. In fact, it can give you greater freedom and confidence.

See our free advice leaflet, *Your Safety*, for more information on preventing accidents in the home.

Looking after your feet

Looking after your feet and having regular foot-care check-ups are very important aspects of personal care. Foot problems can have a major affect on mobility, balance and stability.

It is important to choose suitable shoes that fit you well. Generally, high-sided footwear with low heels and thin-soles with a good grip will give you extra stability if you are at all unsteady. But different individuals do have different needs. So ask your doctor or chiropodist for advice on the best sort of shoes for you.

For example, if you have arthritis you may find that trainers or similar, well-cushioned shoes are a comfortable form of footwear that can offer you welcome support and protection. But bear in mind that they tend to have thick soles, and, because you cannot feel the floor so well, you might feel more unsteady.

Here are a few tips that can help everyone stay steady on their feet:

- Avoid wearing slippers which are loose and worn-out or which don't have backs, or sandals and shoes with high heels.
- Flared trousers and clothing that trails to the ground can also increase your risk of slipping or tripping.
- Avoid walking on slippery floors in socks or tights.

See our free advice leaflet, *Fitter Feet*, for practical advice on caring for your feet.

Dealing with anxiety about falling

Everyone stumbles and trips at some point. But as we get older, falling can become a serious worry. There are many reasons why the risk of falls and fractures increases with age, including weaker bones and muscles, and reduced mobility. On average, the risk of falling does increase as people get older, but falling is **not** an inevitable result of ageing. And there are things you can do to reduce the risk.

You may be anxious because you have had a fall already. Or perhaps you are worried about falling, even if it has never happened before. This sometimes happens after a period of illness, when you don't feel you can react so quickly. Whatever the reason, anxiety about falling can be very difficult to deal with. The impact it can have on your life can be far worse than a physical injury from falling.

It is important to remember that there **are** ways to get your confidence back. This leaflet gives advice on things that can help you to be steady on your feet. But if you are anxious about falling, don't think that you have to struggle on alone. Talk to your doctor. They, or a physiotherapist, can help you work out what you can do to regain your balance, strength and confidence. We tell you more about this in the next section.

People who are anxious about falling often lose confidence in carrying out daily tasks and activities. This might mean that you start limiting what you do in your daily life. Do you find that you are becoming more cautious in your movements and don't do as much at home? Is getting out and about on your own frightening? You may think about how embarrassing it would be if you fell in public. Perhaps you find that you see people less than you used to. Feeling like this about falling is very common. It leaves many people feeling anxious, isolated or even depressed.

It is important to remember that reducing your physical and social activities is not the answer. Rather than preventing you from having a fall, this will increase the risk.

Perhaps you are uneasy about asking for help because you are worried about losing your independence. Are you worried that if you tell someone, they will think you are frail and can't look after yourself properly? Are you concerned that they will want to put you in a care home? Try not to let these worries prevent you from taking positive steps to get your confidence back. Remember, the purpose of falls prevention is to enable you to live as independent and enjoyable a life as possible.

No one can predict for certain when you may fall. But remember, falling is **not** an inevitable result of old age. There are ways to reduce the risk of it happening to you. If you do have a fall, you can get help to make it less likely to happen again. We look at the help you can get in the next section.

Help from the NHS

It is important to tell your doctor if you have a fall or start feeling unsteady, even if you feel okay otherwise. There are ways to reduce the risk of falling in the future and give you more confidence in your daily life. People who have already had a fall are more likely to fall in the future. But there **are** ways to avoid this.

There can be many different reasons for someone being at risk of falling. This means there are also many different ways of managing it. Your doctor should **check your balance and walking**. This may involve one or more simple tests to see if your balance or walking could be improved.

If you have problems with your balance or walking, or if you've had a fall, your doctor should offer you a **falls risk assessment**.

This will be carried out by a healthcare professional with specialist training and experience. You may be asked to go to a falls clinic for the assessment if there is one in your area. The purpose of the assessment is to try to work out what is making you more likely to fall, taking into account anything you feel would be particularly helpful.

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) has produced a leaflet explaining what you can expect from your falls risk assessment. See page 14 for more details and how to order a copy.

The health professional who carried out your assessment should talk to you about whether you need an **individual action plan** to reduce your risk of falling. This could include strength and balance exercises, having your home checked for hazards, investigating any continence problems you may have, having your eyesight tested and looking at your medicine to see if it needs changing. The plan should be designed especially for you, to suit your individual needs and way of life.

Osteoporosis

If a minor bump or fall results in a broken bone, then it is likely to be due to osteoporosis. Osteoporosis is a loss of bone density, which causes bones to become fragile and liable to break very easily. Many factors can increase your risk of osteoporosis.

These include:

- a close family history of osteoporosis, heavy drinking, smoking, lack of exercise and certain medical conditions;
- a drop in the amount of oestrogen in women after the menopause (especially if it was early or your ovaries were removed with a hysterectomy); or

- low levels of the male hormone testosterone in men.

The health of your bones can make a big difference to the effect a fall will have on you. You can keep your bones healthy by eating a diet rich in calcium and vitamin D, and taking regular, weight-bearing exercise. Many healthy older people don't eat enough calcium or get enough sunlight to have adequate vitamin D in their body. Discuss whether you need any treatments to strengthen your bones with your nurse, doctor or falls co-ordinator. See our free advice leaflet, *Healthy Bones*, for more information.

Community alarms

If you are worried about falling while you are alone at home, you could think about getting a community alarm. Community alarms allow you to call for help from your home even if you can't reach a telephone. You contact a 24-hour response centre by pressing a button on a pendant or wristband that you wear all the time. Staff at the centre will call out the best person to help you – perhaps a neighbour, relative or friend or the emergency services.

Many local councils run community alarm schemes – contact your council's housing department for more information. Help the Aged runs its own immediate telephone response service called **SeniorLink**. For more information call **0845 603 4576**.

Further information

Help the Aged produces a strength and balance exercise video *Be Strong, Be Steady* (price £12) available in English, Punjabi (Urdu insert), Cantonese or Bengali. To order a copy, call 0870 770 0441 and quote N2601. We also produce a video/DVD of strength and balance exercises called *Step to the Future* (price £12) available in English, with English subtitles or with a Hindi voiceover.

To order a copy, call 0870 770 0441 quoting N2701 for the video and N2702 for the DVD. Prices do not include postage and packing. You can also order both titles online at www.helptheaged.org.uk/homeshopping

We also produce a home exercise booklet called *Strength and Balance Exercises for Healthy Aging* which costs £6 (plus P&P). Contact our Publications department on 020 7239 1946.

You can check what other resources are available, including our home exercise booklet, by visiting the preventing falls section of our website www.helptheaged.org.uk/slipstrips

The **National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE)** has produced a free information booklet on falls for older people, their families and carers called *Falls: the assessment and prevention of falls in older people*. It explains the clinical guidelines that NHS health professionals and practitioners should follow in assessing and preventing falls. To order a copy call the NHS Response Line on 0870 1555 455 and quote reference number N0761. Or write to:

National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence
MidCity Place, 71 High Holborn, London WC1V 6NA
Tel: 020 7067 5800
Web: www.nice.org.uk

National Osteoporosis Society
Camerton, Bath BA2 0PJ
Tel: 01761 471771 Helpline: 0845 450 0230
Web: www.nos.org.uk

The National Osteoporosis Society provides advice and information on all aspects of osteoporosis through its medical helpline and information booklets, as well as offering people with osteoporosis support through its network of local groups.

What to do if you fall

Try not to panic.

Get help if you can. Don't move if you feel pain. Try to attract attention by banging on the floor or wall; use a personal call alarm if you have one; or call 999 if you can reach a phone.

If you can't get help, and you are not hurt, try to get up.

A lot of people have problems after falling, even if they don't hurt themselves. This is because they lie on the floor for a long time and get cold.

- First, check that you are not hurt.
- Then roll on to your hands and knees and crawl to a sturdy piece of furniture: for example, a chair or bed.
- Put your hands on the chair or bed and bring one leg up, bending your knee and placing your foot flat on the floor.
- Lean forwards, pushing with your hands and foot and bring your other foot up so that it is also flat on the floor and you are crouching.
- Turn and sit on the furniture.
- Make sure you rest for a while before you try to stand up. (You could practise doing all this before it even happens!)

If you are hurt or can't get up, keep yourself warm.

Cover yourself with a coat or anything else you can find. Keep tensing your arm and leg muscles and roll from side to side if you can to keep moving. If you have fallen on a hard floor, try to crawl to a softer, carpeted area if possible.

Help the Aged distributes over 3 million advice leaflets a year. This service is currently provided free of charge, thanks to the generosity of our supporters. If you found this leaflet useful and would like to make a donation, phone 020 7239 1983 quoting ref **IRT** or send a cheque or postal order, for the attention of Information Resources, to the address below.

March 2007

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Fighting for disadvantaged older people in the UK and overseas,

WE WILL:

COMBAT POVERTY wherever older people's lives are blighted by lack of money, and cut the number of preventable deaths from hunger, cold and disease

REDUCE ISOLATION so that older people no longer feel confined to their own home, forgotten or cut off from society

CHALLENGE NEGLECT to ensure that older people do not suffer inadequate health and social care, or the threat of abuse

DEFEAT AGEISM to ensure that older people are not ignored or denied the dignity and equality that are theirs by right

PREVENT FUTURE DEPRIVATION by improving prospects for employment, health and well-being so that dependence in later life is reduced

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