

Staying steady

How to reduce your
risk of falling



Information written with you in mind.

Our guides are produced with the help of older people, carers and expert peer reviewers.

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Their feedback helps us ensure that our information is as useful as possible for older people and their carers, family and friends.

www.ageuk.org.uk/readers-panel

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What this guide is **about**

As we get older, lots of us start to feel less steady on our feet. You might have had a fall before, or you might have noticed that your balance isn't what it once was. Whatever your situation, there are simple things you can do to help yourself feel more confident and avoid falling.

This guide explains ways you can reduce your risk of falling by looking after your health and checking your home is safe. It also explains who you can turn to for more support.



All of the information in this guide applies in England. This symbol indicates where it differs for Wales and Northern Ireland. If you're in Scotland, contact Age Scotland for advice.

When you're worried about falling, it isn't unusual to become cautious and lose confidence – and this can stop you doing the things you used to do and make you feel more isolated. If you're feeling like this, you might be reluctant to ask for help. It can be difficult to admit that the things you once found easy are getting trickier. You might also worry that accepting help will mean you're less independent.

But really, admitting that things have changed and doing something about it could help you stay independent for longer – so it's important to consider the support you may need, both now and in the future.

“Mum seemed to lose a bit of her spark after she had a fall. But she's getting it back now she's got the right support.”

Jasmine, 57



Good to know

In this guide, we refer to lots more organisations that can provide trusted information and advice. For a full list with contact details, see pages 24-26.



Getting help from the NHS

If you're reading this guide because you've had a fall or you're feeling unsteady, tell a healthcare professional such as your doctor. Even if you feel fine otherwise, they can help find out why you might be feeling unsteady – and what might help.

Your doctor can check your balance and the way you walk to see whether changes might help. They may refer you for a falls risk assessment or to a falls prevention service. These services are run by healthcare professionals with specialist training to help people improve their strength and balance.

At a falls risk assessment, the healthcare professional should:

- listen to what you think the problem could be
- try to work out what's making you feel unsteady
- agree on an action plan with you to reduce your risk of falling.

Your action plan should meet your individual needs. It should be regularly reviewed so your healthcare professional can see how you're getting on. It might include:

- strength and balance exercises
- a home safety check
- an eyesight check
- a review of the medicines you take
- explanation of how to get up safely if you fall
- explanation of how to get help if you need it
- investigation of any continence problems you have, to make sure you don't need to rush to the toilet and risk falling on the way.

“I went to the doctor because I was worried about having a fall. I ended up having an assessment, which was a real help.”
Muriel, 90



Good to know

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (page 26) has information on its website about how you can prevent falls and what treatment may be offered if you've had a fall.

Staying active

You might feel that moving less will help you avoid a fall. But actually, moving more and staying active is the best thing you can do to stay as mobile and independent as possible.

Keeping moving as you get older has lots of benefits. Not only can it help you stay steady on your feet, but it can also lessen aches and pains and give your mood a boost.

Moving more

Being active can help you maintain your strength and flexibility and improve your energy levels. This can help you can carry on doing the things you enjoy.

Our bodies were made to move, and there's no need to stop being active just because you get older. There are lots of reasons why getting moving can become trickier – a health condition that affects your mobility, for instance – but you don't have to do vigorous exercise.

Instead, find ways to try to move a bit more throughout the day – in whatever way works for you. Doing the housework, getting off the bus a stop earlier, or trying out chair-based exercises are all great ways to stay active. If you're getting outside more, keep an eye out for potential hazards, such as uneven pavements and wet leaves.

Of course, what we can and can't do varies, so just do what you can when you can. Find something that suits you and your needs – whether that's taking a brisk walk or exercising from your favourite armchair. Moving more is always beneficial, however you do it.

If you experience chest pain or feel faint during an activity, stop immediately and contact your doctor.

Where possible:

- be as active as you can, in whatever ways work for you
- limit or break up the time you spend sitting still
- build up to doing about 2.5 hours per week of moderate exercise (that gets you breathing harder and your heart pumping faster), starting with just 10 minutes at a time
- do activities that improve muscle strength at least twice a week
- do activities that improve balance, coordination and flexibility twice a week – this is particularly important if you've had a fall or you're worried about falling.



Good to know

Exercises that strengthen your legs can help prevent falls. If you're not sure where to start, you could try a balance training exercise, such as a heel raise. Slowly rise onto your tiptoes and then lower back down again – you can try building up to 10 to 15 repetitions. Hold onto the back of a chair or ask someone to support you if you need help with balancing.

Improving your strength and balance

Activities that improve your strength and balance are particularly important as you get older. They can be especially helpful if you have a condition that causes joint pain too. You could try:

- climbing the stairs more often
- repeatedly rising slowly to a standing position from a chair
- walking, playing badminton, dancing or practising yoga
- taking part in special strength and balance exercise classes.

Make sure that any exercise classes, or exercises described in guides or videos, are suitable for you and that you feel comfortable doing them. If you're not sure, or if you haven't been exercising regularly or have a heart condition, speak to your doctor first.

For more information about recommended activities as well as free exercise guides and videos, visit the NHS website (page 25).



In Wales, visit the NHS 111 Wales website and in Northern Ireland, visit the NI Direct website.



Good to know

Lots of local Age UKs run exercise and activity classes. Visit the Age UK website or contact your local Age UK to find out what's available near you.

In Wales, Age Cymru runs physical activity programmes including walking groups and Low Impact Functional Training (exercises with seated and standing variations). For more information, call Age Cymru Advice or visit www.agecymru.wales/physical-activity.

Getting started and keeping it up

Making regular activity a part of your routine is one of the best ways to stay well as you get older – and it can also be an opportunity to socialise and meet new people.

A good way to get started is to try different activities and find something that you enjoy. Keep your goals simple and realistic. Once you know what kind of activity is right for you, start gently and build up gradually. Aim to do a little bit more each time, if you can.

It's easier to keep up an activity you enjoy – and that's when you'll improve and begin to feel the benefits. As you become stronger and more flexible and your balance improves, daily tasks should become that bit easier.

If you start an activity with someone else, whether that's a regular walk or a weekly exercise class, you can help motivate each other to stick with it.

If you live in a care home

It's important to find ways keep moving if you live in a care home. Walking is a simple way to stay active and it's low impact, so it doesn't put lots of strain on your joints.

There might be a weekly programme of activities that you can take part in too – such as some gentle stretching or a dance class. If there isn't, you could ask about starting one with the help of care home staff.



Good to know

Our **Healthy living** guide has more information on different ways you can get active depending on your current activity levels.



Your health

If you've noticed you're not as steady as you used to be, it's worth thinking about any health factors that could be at play.

Eyesight, hearing and balance

Your vision and hearing play a vital role in keeping you balanced, so having your eyes and ears tested can help reduce the risk of a fall.

Eye care

Sight problems are more common in later life, so it's important you look after your eyes in any way you can.

- Get your eyes checked and your glasses prescription reviewed at least every 2 years – or more often if your optician recommends it.
- Have a regular eye test even if you think your sight is fine, as opticians can detect eye conditions at an early stage. NHS eye tests are free once you reach the age of 60.
- Glasses fitted with 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 use these kinds of lenses, ask your optician for advice.

- If you care for someone who might be unable to recognise or communicate that they have a sight problem – for example, someone living with dementia – arrange regular eye tests for them. You can ask the optician to adapt the tests to accommodate the person's needs. Encourage the person you care for to wear their glasses and make sure the lenses are cleaned frequently.
- Contact the Royal National Institute of Blind People (page 26) for information about eye problems.
- If you or anyone you care for finds it difficult to get to the optician for health reasons, look for an optician who offers a home-visiting service. If you live in a care home, staff may arrange a regular visit from a domiciliary eye care service. You can search for opticians near you on the NHS website (page 25).



In Wales, visit the NHS 111 Wales website and in Northern Ireland, visit the NI Direct website.



Good to know

If you receive certain benefits, such as Universal Credit or the Guarantee Credit part of Pension Credit, you could be entitled to help with the cost of new glasses. If you're not eligible for these benefits but you're on a low income, you may be entitled to help through the NHS Low Income Scheme (page 26).

See our factsheet **Help with health costs** for more information. In Wales, see Age Cymru's factsheet **Help with NHS health costs in Wales and services which are free for older people.**

Hearing problems

Our ears are essential in maintaining balance, but people often wait years after noticing hearing issues to tell their doctor.

- Talk to your doctor as soon as you notice your hearing isn't what it used to be. If there's no medical reason for the change in your hearing (such as a build-up of wax or an ear infection), you can be referred for a hearing test and prescribed an NHS digital hearing aid in one or both ears if necessary.
- If you care for someone who's been prescribed a hearing aid, make sure they wear it and check the batteries frequently.
- Contact the Royal National Institute for Deaf People (page 26) for more information. You can try the free hearing check on their website too.

In some areas, you can refer yourself to an audiologist for a hearing assessment. Check at your GP surgery whether this is an option for you.

Combined sight and hearing problems

Sight and hearing problems can have a huge impact on day-to-day life – so it's important to seek help if they're affecting you. Your local council's sensory team can offer help and support. Following an assessment, their specialist staff will explain what help is available.



In Northern Ireland, contact the integrated care team at your local Health and Social Care Trust.



Next steps

Contact Deafblind UK (page 25) for advice if you have problems with both your sight and hearing.



Taking care of your feet

Issues with your feet and footwear can affect your balance and increase your risk of falling – so it's important to look after your feet and make sure you're wearing appropriate footwear.

- Report problems such as foot pain or decreased sensation in your feet to your doctor or practice nurse.
- Keep your toenails short. If you're finding it difficult to cut them yourself, try asking a friend or family member for help or ask your local Age UK or Age Cymru whether it offers a toenail-cutting service (there may be a charge).
- Always wear shoes, sandals or slippers. Don't walk indoors in bare feet, socks or tights.
- Wear shoes or sandals that fit well. High-sided shoes with low heels, thin soles and good grip are normally a safer choice – and it's best to avoid high heels.
- If you have arthritis, you might find that trainers or well-cushioned shoes are more comfortable than ordinary shoes. But make sure the soles aren't too thick, as you could feel unsteady if you can't feel the floor beneath your feet. Ask your doctor or chiropodist for advice.
- Wear slippers with good grip that fasten up securely.
- Make sure your clothing doesn't trail on the ground where it might trip you up.

Managing your medicines

Low blood pressure and poorly controlled diabetes can make you feel faint or dizzy – as can medication in some circumstances. If you ever feel like this, let your doctor or pharmacist know.

If you take medication, it should be reviewed regularly in case you no longer need it or the dose needs to be changed. If you have any concerns about your medicines, speak to your doctor or pharmacist.

Alcohol can increase your risk of falling in and of itself – but it's worth knowing that it can also interact with some medicines in a way that affects your balance. Check the leaflet that comes with your medicine for possible side effects.

Eating and drinking

What you eat and drink can make a real difference to your health, including how steady you feel day to day.

A nutritious, well-balanced diet helps support your bone strength and muscle mass, as well as your energy levels. Maintaining a healthy weight reduces your risk of falling too.

Staying hydrated can keep you feeling steady. Not drinking enough can lower your blood pressure and cause weakness or dizziness. Aim to drink 6 to 8 cups of fluid a day – that's about 1.5 litres or 2.5 pints.



Next steps

For more information about nutrition, hydration and maintaining a weight that's right for you, see our guide **Healthy living**.

Keeping your bones strong

Stronger bones don't just make a fall less likely – they also reduce the risk of more serious injury if you do fall. Regular exercise that keeps you on your feet, such as walking, bowls or tennis, helps keep bones strong and healthy.

Calcium and vitamin D

You need calcium and vitamin D to maintain strong bones – both of which can be found in certain foods.

Dairy foods, fortified soya products and canned fish (including the bones) are all good sources of calcium. Calcium is also found in fortified breakfast cereals, white bread, pulses and nuts (such as almonds).

Salmon, sardines and other oily fish, eggs and fortified spreads are all good sources of vitamin D – however, it's difficult to get enough vitamin D from diet alone. Sunshine is the best source of vitamin D. Try to get outside for short periods each day from March to October, exposing at least your forearms and hands to the sun – but be careful not to let your skin redden or burn.

In autumn and winter, the sun isn't strong enough to produce vitamin D and most people won't get enough from food – so adults should consider taking a daily vitamin D supplement of 10 micrograms (10µg), whatever their age.

You might need a vitamin D supplement all year round if you spend most of the day indoors, have darker skin, or cover your skin for cultural or health reasons. If you think you aren't getting enough vitamin D, ask your doctor or pharmacist for advice.

Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis causes bones to become more fragile. This means minor bumps or falls can result in a broken bone. Your risk of osteoporosis is increased by:

- your age – the older you are, the more likely you are to develop it
- a history of osteoporosis in your family
- a low body weight
- heavy drinking, smoking and a lack of exercise
- some medications, such as long-term steroids, anti-epileptic drugs and some cancer treatments
- an early menopause or hysterectomy with removal of the ovaries if you're female
- low levels of testosterone following surgery for some types of cancer if you're male.



Next steps

Contact the Royal Osteoporosis Society (page 26) or use the osteoporosis risk checker on their website at **www.theros.org.uk/risk-checker**. Speak to your doctor if you think you could be at risk of osteoporosis – this may be more likely if either of your parents broke a hip.



Around the home

Sometimes even familiar environments can become difficult to navigate as we get older. But there are some simple things you can do to feel safer and steadier at home.

Getting a care needs assessment

If you think you could benefit from adaptations to your home, get in touch with your local council's adult social services department, or with the integrated care team in your local Health and Social Care Trust if you live in Northern Ireland.

They'll be able to give you more information about your options and may offer you a free care needs assessment. This involves an assessor coming to your home and having a look at how you're managing everyday tasks and discussing what you'd like to achieve day to day.



Next steps

For more information about the support you might be entitled to, see our guide **Getting help at home**.

Keeping safe at home

To help make your home safer, keep an eye out for things that could make you slip, trip or fall. While some things might seem obvious, it's surprising how often they're overlooked.

- Is there a night light, a bedside light or a torch by the bed in case you need to get up in the night?
- Is there good lighting in your home – particularly on the stairs?
- Are things tidied out of the way of stairs, steps and hallways?
- Are your stairs well lit and free from any trip hazards? Are there handrails on both sides – or could you consider a stair lift?
- Are floors clear of trailing wires, wrinkled or fraying rugs and carpets, or anything else you might trip or slip on?
- Is there a fitted handrail in the bathroom?
- Are there non-slip mats under rugs?
- Are garden paths clear and free from moss? Watch out for other uneven paths and slippery surfaces as well – handrails might be a helpful addition in some situations.
- Do you use a stepladder to reach high places? Always ask someone to help if you're using a ladder – and avoid standing on chairs.
- If your pet gets under your feet, could you put a bell on their collar?



Next steps

For more information, see our guides **Adapting your home** and **Staying safe**.

Making some small changes to your daily routine or asking for a bit of help can make a big difference too.

- Tense your arms and legs a few times before getting up from a chair. When getting out of bed, sit on the side for a few minutes before standing up.
- Take your time standing up and then keep still for a moment to steady yourself before walking. Sitting or standing up too quickly can make you feel lightheaded.
- Move your head slowly to avoid dizziness – especially if you have arthritis in your spine or neck. Speak to your doctor if you ever feel dizzy or need to use furniture for support when moving around.
- Try to stay warm, as cold muscles don't work as well and may lead to accidents and injuries.
- Get help with tasks like cleaning windows or changing light bulbs if they make you feel dizzy or lightheaded or if you feel unsteady.

Get a home safety check

Contact your local council to find out if it offers home safety checks or a handyperson scheme. Alternatively, there may be a Home Improvement Agency (HIA) offering similar help locally. Contact Foundations (page 25), which is the national body for HIAs.

Local Age UKs also operate handyperson services in many areas. These services offer extra help with small practical jobs, from putting up curtain rails to installing energy-efficient light bulbs. Call Age UK Advice to get the details of your local Age UK.



In Wales, contact your local Age Cymru to find out if there's a handyperson or HandyVan scheme in your area or contact Care and Repair Cymru (page 25). In Northern Ireland, check with Age NI to find out more about local handyperson schemes.

Telecare

If you're worried about what might happen if you fall, simple technology known as 'telecare' can help put your mind at ease. For example, a bed or chair sensor can detect if you've got up but not returned within a set time and automatically send an alert to a carer or call centre in case you've fallen.

Personal alarms allow you to call for help if you need it – for example, if you're unwell or if you have a fall and can't reach a telephone. You can contact a 24-hour response centre by pressing a button on a pendant or wristband. Staff at the emergency response centre will then call either your chosen contact – a neighbour, relative or friend – or the emergency services if the situation is more urgent.

Your local council may run a telecare or personal alarm scheme. Visit www.gov.uk/apply-for-community-alarm to search by postcode and apply for an alarm.

"I'd heard about personal alarms at a falls clinic so I contacted the council to get one sorted."

Marion, 86



Next steps

See our guide **Adapting your home** for more information about telecare.

What to do if you have a fall

Even if you follow our tips for staying steady, it's good to be prepared and know what to do if you have a fall.

If you're not hurt and you're in a safe place

The first thing to do is try to get yourself up. If you can, the best way to do this is by rolling onto your hands and knees and then holding onto something stable, such as a bed or armchair. Take your time getting up to avoid losing your balance.

Even if you're not injured, it's a good idea to speak to your doctor or other healthcare professional about your fall so that you can work out what the cause was and how you can reduce your risk of falling in the future.

If you're unable to get up or you're injured

If you have a personal alarm, you can use this to get help – for more information, see page 22. Alternatively, you could bang on a wall or the floor to get the attention of neighbours or passers-by. If you carry a mobile phone, it's a good idea to have the phone numbers of key friends or neighbours saved.

You can also call **999** or **111** for help. Many areas operate a falls response service. These provide quick responses to people who have fallen but don't have any serious injuries. If your area operates a falls response service, you may get help from emergency responders, fire service crews or St John Ambulance.

While waiting for help to arrive, try to keep warm by covering yourself with something within reach, such as a coat, blanket or rug. If you can and it's not too painful, try to keep moving – this will help to keep you warm and maintain blood flow.

Useful organisations

Age UK

We provide information and advice for people in later life through our Age UK Advice Line, publications and website.

Age UK Advice: 0800 169 65 65

Lines are open 7 days a week from 8am to 7pm.

www.ageuk.org.uk

In Wales, contact Age Cymru Advice: **0300 303 44 98**

www.agecymru.wales

In Northern Ireland, contact Age NI: **0808 808 7575**

www.ageni.org

In Scotland, contact Age Scotland: **0800 124 4222**

www.agescotland.org.uk

Arthritis UK

Provides information and support to people with arthritis.

Tel: **0800 5200 520**

www.arthritis-uk.org

Deafblind UK

Provides services, information and advice for people who are deafblind or have sight and hearing loss.

Tel: **0800 132320**

Email: **info@deafblind.org.uk**

www.deafblind.org.uk

Home Improvement Agencies

Help older homeowners and private tenants organise repairs, improvements and adaptations to their homes.

In England, contact **Foundations**

Tel: **0300 124 0315**

wwwFOUNDATIONS.org.uk

In Wales, contact **Care & Repair Cymru**

Tel: **02920 107580**

www.careandrepair.org.uk

NHS

Comprehensive information service to help you take control of your healthcare. The website includes an A-Z health dictionary and symptom checker.

www.nhs.uk

In Wales, contact **NHS 111 Wales**

Tel: **111**

111.wales.nhs.uk

In Northern Ireland, contact **NI Direct**

www.nidirect.gov.uk

NHS Low Income Scheme

Provides full or partial help with health costs for people living on a low income.

Tel: **0300 330 1343**

In England: **www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/nhs-low-income-scheme**

In Wales: **www.gov.wales/low-income-scheme-help-nhs-health-costs**

NICE (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence)

Provides guidance on being healthy and treating illnesses in England and Wales. You can download their publication on falls assessment and prevention in older people.

www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng249

RNIB (Royal National Institute of Blind People)

Provides information and support for blindness and visual impairment.

Tel: **0303 123 9999**

www.rnib.org.uk

RNID (Royal National Institute for Deaf People)

Provides advice and support through an information line and range of factsheets.

Tel: **0808 808 0123**

Text: **07360 268 988**

Email: **contact@rnid.org.uk**

www.rnid.org.uk

Royal Osteoporosis Society

Offers information and support on prevention and treatment of osteoporosis.

Tel: **0808 800 0035**

www.theros.org.uk

Help us be there for someone else

We hope you found this guide useful. When times are tough, it's so important to get some support. You can help us reach everyone who needs us:

1

Tell us your story. If Age UK's information and advice has helped you, we'd love to hear about it. Email stories@ageuk.org.uk.

2

Donate to us. We rely on donations to support older people when they need us most. To make a donation, call us on **0800 169 8787** or go online at www.ageuk.org.uk/donate.

3

Volunteer with us. Our volunteers make an incredible difference to people's lives. Find out more at www.ageuk.org.uk/volunteer or contact your local Age UK.

4

Campaign with us. We campaign to make life better for older people, and rely on the help of our strong network of campaigners. Add your voice at www.ageuk.org.uk/campaigns.

5

Remember us in your will. A gift to Age UK in your will is a very special way of helping older people get expert support in the years to come. Find out more by calling **020 3033 1421** or visit www.ageuk.org.uk/legacy.

What should I do now?

You might want to read some of our relevant information guides and factsheets, such as:

- **Getting help at home**
- **Advice for carers**
- **Healthy living**

You can find all of our guides and factsheets on our website, along with lots more useful information. Visit **www.ageuk.org.uk** to get started.

You can order free printed copies of any guide or factsheet by emailing **orders@ageuk.org.uk** or calling our Advice Line on **0800 169 65 65**. Our friendly advisers can also help with any questions.

All of our publications are available on request in large print and audio formats.

If contact details for your local Age UK are not in the below box, call Age UK Advice free on **0800 169 65 65**.



0800 169 65 65
www.ageuk.org.uk



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