



Fall Reduction Initiative:  
Establishing New Directions  
for Safety

## Facts about Falls:

### Why we asked you all those questions .....

1. **Watch for Medicine Problems.** Some prescription medicines and some remedies you can buy without a doctor's prescription can make you feel sleepy. Be especially careful about medicines for colds, allergies, and pain. People who take many medicines every day (as older adults often do) are more likely to fall than people who take fewer medicines, but even one medicine by itself may increase your risk of falling. Tell your doctor about any medicine you are taking that makes you feel woozy or unsteady. He or she can tell you how to handle this problem. Never stop taking any prescribed medicine without your doctor's permission, even if you start to feel better.

**Your primary care doctor needs to know about all the medicines you are taking, especially if another doctor prescribed them for you.** Ask your doctor if the non-prescription medicines you are taking can be taken together with your prescription medicines. Always follow the directions that you get with your medicines. Be sure to take all your medicines at the right time and don't take more or less than prescribed. If you are unsure about how to take a medicine, ask your doctor or pharmacist.

2. **"We have nothing to fear but fear itself."** Many older adults who are afraid of falling stop doing activities they enjoy and just sit at home. Besides not being much fun, sitting around all the time lets your muscles lose strength, which actually increases the risk of falling. Look in the Yellow Pages of your telephone book under "Rehabilitation Services" for rehabilitation centers that may be able to give you information about decreasing your fear of falling by regaining strength and confidence.
3. **Fall History Often Repeats Itself.** People who have recently fallen are more likely to fall again than people who have not fallen.
4. **Take Your Time When You Get Up.** If you feel dizzy when you get up, it could make you fall. Stand up slowly and don't start to walk until your head is clear. If you often feel dizzy when you get out of bed or wobble when you try to get up from a chair, let your doctor know as soon as you can.

5. **Your Doctor Needs to Know if You Often Feel Unsteady on Your Feet.** You are more likely to fall if you are unsteady on your feet. If you frequently feel like you might fall, and you haven't talked it over with your doctor, you should do so soon. Your doctor can work with you to find out why you are unsteady and suggest ways to help you.
6. **Don't Suffer In Silence.** Rushing to the bathroom, especially at night, can lead to a fall. Make sure the way to the bathroom is lighted and free of things that could cause you to fall. If you frequently need to rush to the bathroom, please tell your doctor and ask him or her to help you find ways to deal with the problem.
7. **Avoid Alcohol Problems.** Drinking too much alcohol can make you unsteady on your feet. Mixing alcohol and medicines, even over-the-counter remedies, can make you even more unsteady than alcohol or medicines by themselves.
8. **Check for Hearing Loss.** Poor hearing can cause a fall indirectly. For example, if you can't hear a car starting up in a parking lot, it could hit you before you realize it's moving. Have your hearing tested each year, or more often as recommended by your doctor. Ask your doctor about ways you can make adjustments for lost hearing. Look in the yellow pages of your telephone book under Rehabilitation Services for rehabilitation centers that may also be able to help.
9. **Test for Loss of Sight.** Have your eyesight checked once a year, or more often as recommended by your doctor. Poor eyesight can cause you to fall because you might not see something in your way, or you might miss a step on the stairs. Make sure the lighting in your home is good, and keep your floors and stairs free of objects.
10. **Exercise Regularly - "Use it or lose it."** If you don't keep active, your muscles will weaken. Call your Area Agency on Aging or ask your doctor about exercise programs for older adults.

Please take the time to learn more about how you can help avoid falls. Fall prevention sheets on many of topics discussed above are available at this screening.

**Thank you for your interest in fall injury prevention.**



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## Feed Your Body Healthy Food

Advice about healthy eating seems to be everywhere. What we hear and read may sometimes be confusing! Getting older, however, means that healthful eating is more important than ever. Eating a variety of foods from all five food groups can provide the energy and nutrition you need to stay healthy and active longer.

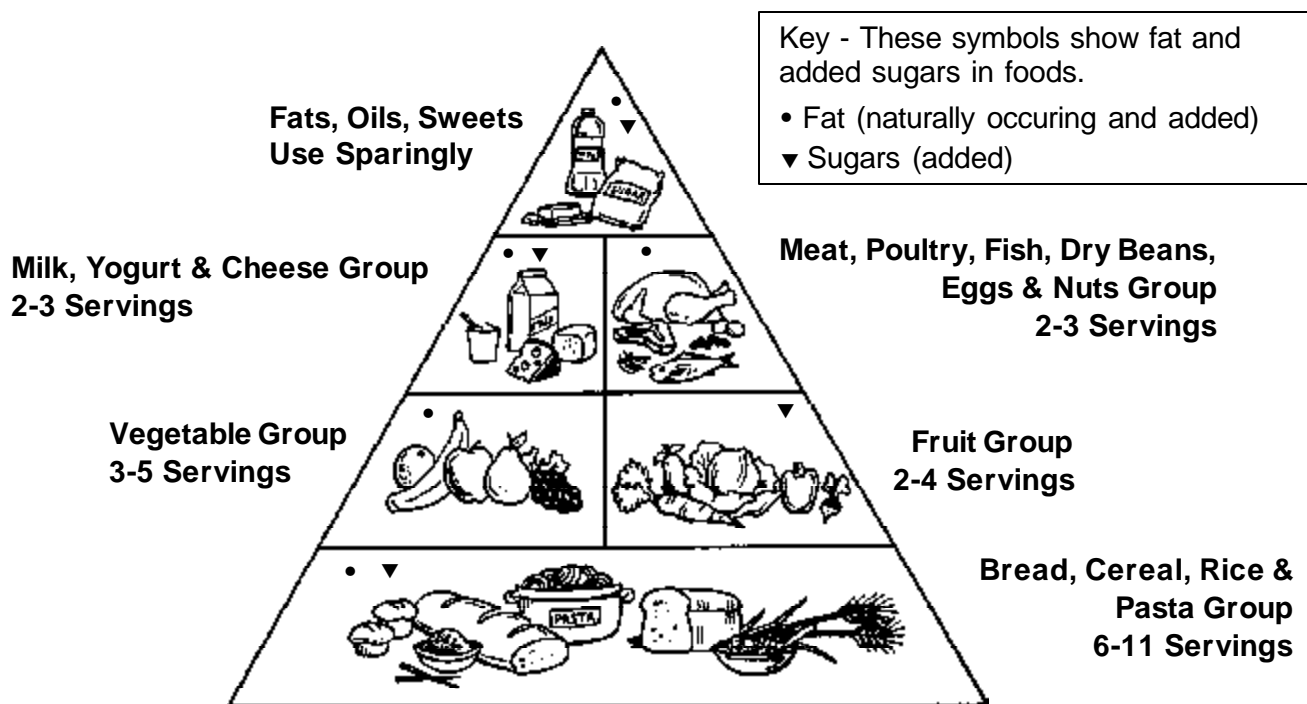
**How can you know which foods you need?** The USDA Food Guide Pyramid can help you pick foods for health, energy, and weight control. Most healthy older adults can eat the servings of foods shown on the Pyramid on the back of this page.

Weak bones from conditions such as osteoporosis can cause you to fall. As a result of a fall, weak bones break more easily and take longer to heal than strong bones. You can help to keep your bones strong by eating enough foods that are high in calcium and vitamin D or by taking supplements. Dairy products like milk, cheese, and yogurt contain the most calcium. Dark green vegetables such as broccoli and kale are also good sources of calcium. If you can't drink milk (lactose intolerance), you may be able to eat and drink milk products after adding acidophilus. Fruits and vegetables, breads and grains, and protein foods are important too. Exercising several times a week, along with a varied diet, helps to keep muscles and bones strong.

## Tips for Eating Right for Older Adults

- 1) Eat a variety of foods from each of the five food groups every day. Try to eat bread and grains, fruits and vegetables, milk, and protein foods every day.
- 2) Limit sweets and fatty foods to help control weight. Too many extra pounds make it more difficult to be active, to keep muscles and bones strong.
- 3) Cutting back on salt helps many people lower their high blood pressure.
- 4) Limit alcohol. For some people, even a small amount can disturb balance, which could cause you to fall.
- 5) Lightly cook vegetables with little added fat. Cut vegetables and fruits into small pieces for easier chewing.
- 6) Make small changes in your diet and continue them.
- 7) Seek and follow professional advice for special health conditions such as osteoporosis, diabetes, or heart disease. A registered dietitian (RD) or trained nutritionist can help you plan a diet that is right for you.

Even small improvements in your eating habits can add up to more energy and a stronger, healthier body!





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## Alcohol May Make You Fall

You know that drinking and driving don't mix, but did you know that drinking and aging don't either? At age 30, your body probably felt little effect from two drinks. But at age 60, two drinks will have a definite effect on you. Why?

As you age, your body takes longer to break down alcohol. That means it stays in your system longer.

Also, <sup>1</sup>83% of adults age 65 and older take at least one prescription drug. <sup>1</sup>Over half of all prescriptions for older adults contain a sedative that can make you feel sleepy. Sedatives and alcohol, taken together, are especially dangerous for you as you get older.



### **You don't have to be an alcoholic for alcohol to cause you harm.**

Alcohol use affects older adults in many ways:

- Your liver is more easily damaged by alcohol.
- Alcohol may cause low body temperature or hypothermia.
- Alcohol may affect your ability to digest food, which could lead to malnutrition. Malnutrition causes many health problems.
- Alcohol may cause loss of coordination and balance, which could cause you to fall.
- Alcohol may cause memory loss, stomach irritation, high blood pressure, and depression.

You may turn to alcohol to relieve stress or anxiety because you are bored or lonely, or to help you sleep. But using alcohol only adds to your problems.

You can gain control of your life. Join a local senior center or club to meet new friends and do participate in some activities. Many counties offer transportation at no cost or for a small fee. Contact your Area Agency on Aging for more information. You can find the number in the blue pages of the phone book, listed under "Aging" or "Senior Citizens."

If you have a problem with alcohol, get help. Older adult usually do very well in treatment programs. Talk to your doctor or to an experienced counselor. Contact your local Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) or other support group. Look in your phone book, or call the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD) at 1-800-622-2255 for information on treatment programs in your area.

<sup>1</sup>House of Representatives Select Committee on Aging Report, February, 1992.



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## Ease Your Fear of Falling

Are you watching more and more television than you used to? Are you being less active than you want to be? Is it because you are afraid of falling? Many older adults are afraid of falling, so they reduce their activities. But usually their problems can be easily managed.

Do any of these people sound like you?

Molly's vision began to change, a part of aging, she thought. She had trouble judging the height of a stair or curb, and she often stumbled over them. One day, Molly's son was walking with her when he noticed her stumble. She admitted that she was having trouble with her vision. He encouraged Molly to get an eye exam. Molly did, and found that her vision problem was correctable. Now she is her normal, active self again.



John began to feel dizzy and anxious. He didn't want to leave the house. His wife said that maybe his new medicine, prescribed by another doctor, was causing his problems. He called his family doctor who John to bring all of his prescriptions office the next day. The physician realized that the new prescription did not mix with the other medications John was taking. John's doctor prescribed a different medication, and in no time, John was feeling fine. He was no longer dizzy or anxious. He now hopes it doesn't rain so he can head to the golf course.

Thelma hardly ever got out of her chair; she had trouble with her balance. A neighbor was concerned that she hadn't seen too much of Thelma lately, so she went over for a visit to ask why. Thelma began to cry. She admitted that she was afraid of falling. The neighbor told her about a balance and exercise class offered at the local senior center. Thelma reluctantly agreed to try the program for a week. She was amazed at how much better she felt just getting out and spending time with old and new friends. The exercise class was great. The week turned into months, and a healthier and stronger Thelma welcomes each new day.

It's now your chance to turn your fear of falling into a success story like Molly, John, and Thelma. Talk to a friend or your physician to get help for whatever is keeping you from enjoying life to its fullest. Problems can be solved or managed, and you will be much happier and healthier to have yours properly treated. Becoming inactive won't protect you. You cannot hide from falls by becoming a couch potato. Your body needs activity to maintain bone and muscle strength. You'll gain confidence, independence, and the desire to get back into the swing of things.

**Free yourself by getting rid of your fear of falling!**



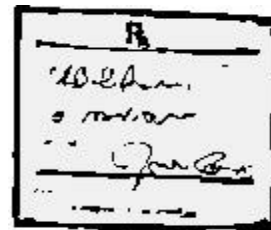
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## Reactions to Medications May Increase Your Risk of Falling

You take medications to help you get or stay healthy, but did you know that some medications — even over-the-counter drugs — may cause a reaction that increases your risk of falling?

83% of adults 65 years of age and older take a least one prescription medication. Medications taken for high blood pressure, high blood sugar, depression, and allergies may cause:

- Sleepiness
- Confusion
- Memory Loss
- Dizziness and loss of balance
- Numbness of the hands and feet
- Blurred Vision



Any of these could put you at risk of falling. Obviously, you need to keep taking your medications to treat your health problems. So what can you do to reduce your risk of falling?

### Do:

- Read the warnings and patient information that come with each prescription. Have your pharmacist explain them to you if you aren't sure what they mean.
- Take your prescription as directed — the proper dosage, the time you take the medication, and whether it is taken with or without food is very important. Check with your doctor or pharmacist if you are unsure of the directions, or are having reactions. **Do not stop taking prescribed medication without first talking to your doctor.**
- Carry a list of your medications, including dosages, with you. Show the list to your doctor at each visit.
- Let all of your health care providers know about all of the medications you are taking, including over-the-counter drugs.
- Store your medication according to any instructions provided by the pharmacist.

## **Don't:**

- Don't mix over-the-counter drugs or herbal remedies with your prescriptions without first checking with your doctor or pharmacist.
- Don't mix alcohol and medications.
- Don't take someone else's medication.
- Don't take out-of-date medications. They may have lost their potency.

Be alert to the ways you can reduce your risk of falling. Be especially careful when you begin taking a new prescription. Your body may need some time to get used to the medication. If you suspect any problems with the medication, call your doctor.

Some medications that could increase your risk of falling are:

- Diabetes medication
- Muscle relaxants
- Sedatives (tranquilizers)
- Antihistamines/allergy medications
- Over-the-counter cold remedies
- Sleeping pills
- Pain killers
- Blood pressure medication (antihypertensives)
- Antidepressants

**Remember: Do not stop taking your prescription medication or alter the dosage without first consulting your doctor.**

Taking your medications properly will help to keep you healthy, *and* will reduce your risk of falling.



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## If the Shoe Fits...

Everyone knows how important a solid foundation is when building a house, but do you realize that it is just as important for you to have firm footing? Wearing properly-fitted, sturdy shoes can give you a solid foundation and decrease your risk of falling.

Did you know that...

- Falls are the leading cause of injury death in people over the age of 65?
- Falls result in approximately 200,000 hip fractures in older adults each year?
- A study of falls in older adults showed that poorly-fitting or improperly-designed shoes significantly increased the risk of suffering a hip fracture from a fall?
- Two-thirds of the falls resulting in hip fractures occurred in people wearing poorly-fitting or improperly-designed shoes?
- Individuals at high risk for falls report less frequent use of “safe” shoes?<sup>1</sup>

### **Don't be a victim of poorly-fitting or improperly-designed shoes.**

Take the time to try on both shoes to make sure that each one fits comfortably. Walk down the aisle a few times to make sure you feel balanced in the shoes. Shoes should feel comfortable when you try them on. If they don't feel comfortable and/or they don't give you a solid foundation, don't buy them. It is important to wear the proper shoes for the activity you are doing. For example when walking for exercise, wear solid, cushioned athletic or walking shoes, not sandals.

### **You can take other steps to reduce your risk of falling because of poorly-fitting or improperly-designed shoes.**

- Wear well-fitted shoes or sandals that cover your entire foot. Have firm soles to give you greater confidence and stability when walking.
- In dry weather, wear supportive, thin, smooth, non-leather soled shoes. If it is raining or snowing, wear shoes or boots with non-skid soles.
- Wear low-heeled shoes; heels should be 1-1/2 inches high or less.

- Avoid wearing smooth-soled slippers or socks on stairs and waxed floors.
- Wear comfortable socks and hose.
- Consult your doctor if you are a diabetic, or if you have any foot diseases or problems. Your doctor will tell you how to keep your feet healthy, and instruct you on how to purchase properly-fitted shoes for your feet.
- Replace shoes that are worn out. They may no longer have the support they once did.

**Tips for buying shoes:**

- Try shoes on in the afternoon when feet tend to be more swollen.
- When you try on the shoe, there should be enough space for your toes to lay flat and straight. There should be room for you to move your toes.
- The widest part of the shoe should match the widest part of your foot.
- The back of the shoe (the part that hugs the heel) should be firm and snug enough to keep your foot in the proper position when you walk.
- The sole of the shoe should be flexible so that it can bend as you walk.
- Make sure the shoe has good arch support. If you have high arches, you'll need more cushioning. People with low arches (flat-feet) should choose shoes with a lot of support.
- The heel of the shoe should be wide and stable. Women's heels should be no more than 1-1/2 inches high.

Keep your feet firmly planted ... in comfortable, properly-designed and fitted shoes!

<sup>1</sup>Harborview Injury Prevention and Research Center *Falls in Older Adults: The Facts*



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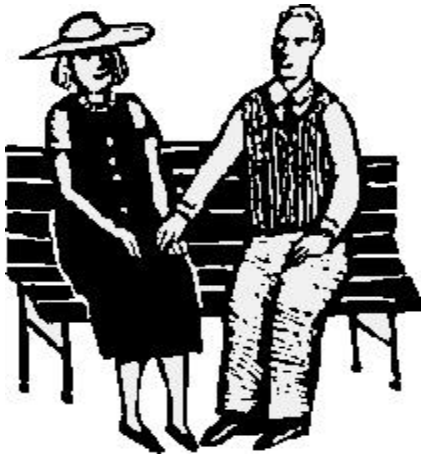
## Some Medical Conditions Can Make You Fall

Mary has a touch of **arthritis**. Sometimes she's a *little* stiff and has trouble getting out of a chair.

John wears a hearing aid for his **hearing loss** and has **cataracts**. Sometimes he doesn't *hear* or see his cat. Tiger, lying across the rug in front of his feet.



Myrtle has **Parkinson's Disease** and is often a *little shaky* on her feet.



Harvey has **diabetes** and needs medicine to control his blood sugar. Sometimes he feels a *little dizzy* when his medicine doesn't control his blood sugar levels just right.

Sarah often must get up at night to go to the bathroom (**urgency**). Sometimes she needs to get there quickly. Sarah doesn't always remember to give herself time to be fully awake and alert before she moves quickly from her bed.

**What do all of these people have in common?**

All of them have medical conditions that can increase their risk of falling.

Many medical conditions can cause people to have problems getting around:

- Arthritis, which causes stiffness and/or pain
- Poor eye sight, which may make it hard to see things that can cause falls, like clutter on the floor or steps
- Loss of hearing, which may make it hard to hear things that could cause a fall, such as a pet sitting at your feet
- Parkinson's disease, which causes shakiness and unsteadiness

- Diabetes, which may cause dizziness
- Incontinence or urgency, which may make it necessary to hurry to the restroom.

### **What You Can Do To Lower Your Risk of Falling**

If you are under treatment for any medical condition which you think may make you fall, or if you often feel unsteady on your feet, it is important to discuss, with your doctor, the steps that you can take to prevent falls.

Falls can lead to serious, lasting disability. If you aren't sure if your medical conditions are under control, ask your doctor what you can do.

Remember to keep your living areas well-lighted, free of clutter, and in good repair.



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## Is Your Home Safe?

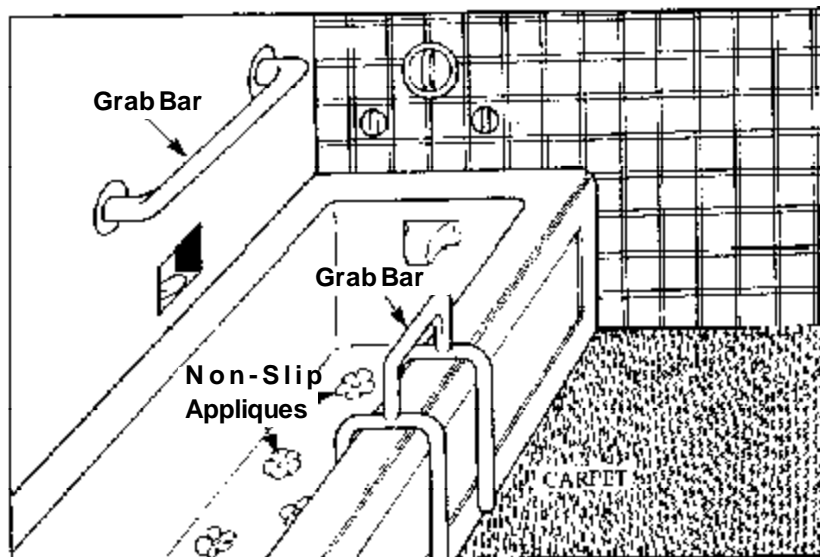
Hazards around your home can cause you serious injury! Use this checklist to identify hazards that could cause falls, slips and trips in the home. The items to which you answered NO should be corrected as soon as possible.

### Throughout the home

- |     |    |   |
|-----|----|---|
| Yes | No | Is there good, even lighting throughout the house?<br>If not, increase the lighting by using the highest watt bulb allowed for the light fixture. Use frosted bulbs to reduce glare. If you don't know the correct wattage for the fixture, use a bulb no larger than 60 watts. |
| Yes | No | Are small rugs and runners slip-resistant?<br>Remove rugs and runners that tend to slide. Apply double-faced adhesive carpet tape or rubber matting to the backs of rugs and runners.   |
| Yes | No | Are electrical cords placed out of the flow of traffic?   |

### Bathrooms

- |     |    |   |
|-----|----|---|
| Yes | No | Do you have non-skid mats or carpet on all bathroom floors?                                   |
| Yes | No | Do you keep the light on in the bathroom during the night or use a night light?               |
| Yes | No | Is a high rise seat installed on the toilet, if needed?                                       |
| Yes | No | Do bathtubs and showers have rubber mats, abrasive strips, or surfaces that are not slippery? |



Install grab bars and non-slip appliques in bathtubs and showers.

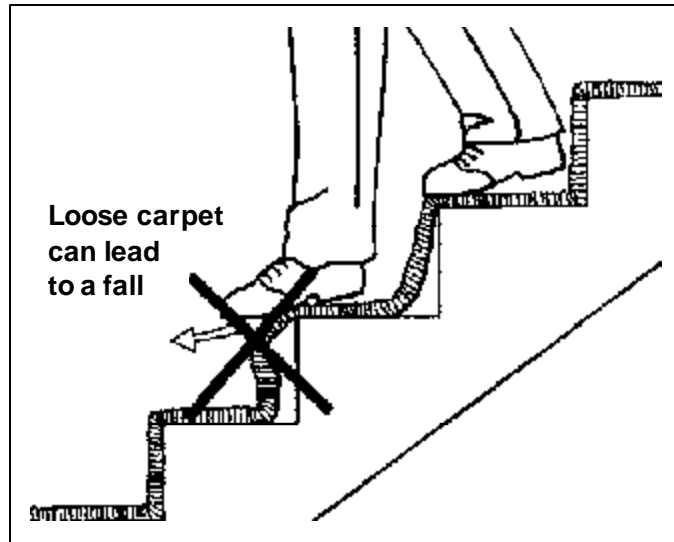
Yes	No	Do bathtubs, showers and toilets have at least 1, preferably 2, grab bars? Check existing bars for sturdiness, and repair if necessary. Attach grab bars, through the tile, to studs in the wall, or install bars specifically designed to attach to the sides of the bathtub. If you are not sure how it is done, get someone who is qualified to help you.
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### Stairs and hallways

Yes	No	Are stairs and hallways well lighted with light switches located at the top and bottom of stairways and at both ends of long hallways?
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Yes	No	Do you have at least 1, preferably 2, sturdy handrails fastened securely on both sides of the entire stairway?
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Yes	No	Do the steps allow secure footing? Make certain the carpet is firmly attached to the steps all along the stairs. Avoid wearing only socks or slippers when using the stairs.
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Carpet should be firmly attached to steps all along the stairs

Yes No Can you clearly see the edges of the steps?  
 If possible, paint the edges of steps white to see them better. Avoid deep pile carpeting or patterned or dark colored carpeting that can make it difficult to see the edges of the steps clearly.

Yes No Do you keep all obstacles or stored items off the stairs and landing?  
 Keep a table nearby for storing items.

### Bedrooms

Yes No Do you have a night light that creates a lighted pathway from the bedroom to the bathroom?

Yes No Is there a source of light such as a lamp or flashlight or light switch within easy reach of your bed?

Yes No Are shoes, clothing or clutter kept out of the walkways?

Yes No Do you have low beds or firm mattresses that make it easy for you to get out of bed?

## **Kitchen**

- Yes No Are upper shelves used only for light-weight items that aren't used often?
- Yes No Do you have a step stool which is stable? Do not stand on chairs or boxes. Use a step stool with a handrail that you can hold onto when standing on the top step.
- Yes No Do you have a non-skid rubber mat placed on the floor in front of the sink?

## **Living area**

- Yes No Do chairs and sofas have arms and steady legs so they don't tilt over when rising or when used for support while walking?
- Yes No Is the furniture arranged to avoid an obstacle course or potential falls?

## **Outdoor area**

- Yes No Are doorways, steps, porches and walkways free of obstacles including ice and leaves; and are they well lighted?
- Yes No Are porches, balconies, terraces, window wells and other heights or depressions protected by railings, banisters or other barriers?

## **Additional considerations**

- Yes No Are emergency numbers and your address posted on or near all telephones?
- Yes No Do you have access to a telephone that can be reached from the floor in case you fall?
- Yes No Do you have a telephone in the room where you spend most of your time?