

Helping seniors reduce their risk for falls



Special for Falls Prevention Awareness Week

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Falls are one of the biggest contributors to fatal and nonfatal injuries among seniors. In addition to threatening safety, falls can compromise a person's independence, cause broken bones, impaired mobility, and even death.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention an older adult is treated in the ER for a fall every 13 seconds, and an older adult dies from a fall every 20 minutes. One-third of Americans age 65 and older fall each year, but falls don't have to be a side effect of aging. With balance training and other techniques, older adults can avoid falls and injuries.

Guidelines of the National Falls Prevention Resource Cen-

ter of The National Council on Aging, offers these fall-prevention tips:

- **Get a Vision Check-up.** A decrease in visual ability and perception can increase risk of falls, causing people to trip over items they can't see, miss steps, or bump into obstacles. Seeing your eye doctor regularly is important, as is ensuring adequate lighting on stairs.

- **Know Your Medication Side Effects.** Medications you are taking can contribute to dizziness or decreased balance, including blood pressure, which can cause light-headedness. Talk to your doctor about substituting a medication if your existing prescription is affecting your balance.

- **Begin a Regimen of Strength Training.** Strength exercises help keep muscles strong, and increases bone strength and metabolism to keep weight and blood sugar in check.

- **Engage in Specific Balance Exercises.** Balance exercises can improve stability. Try balancing on one foot while

standing for a period of time. Stand up from a seated position without using your hands, then shift your weight from the left to right while standing on the respective leg on that side. A physical therapist can work with you to ensure you are using correct form in balance exercises.

- **Try Tai Chi.** Tai chi is a form of movement training that can help strengthen the body, and improve balance and flexibility. Look for tai chi classes at a gym or senior center.

- **Be Aware of Posture.** Try to maintain weight over the ankles, without leaning too far forward or backward, which can cause you to topple over. Keep your feet in a wide stance while standing to improve stability.

- **Don't make quick movements.** Stand up and sit down slowly, as jarring motions can affect equilibrium or blood pressure, leading to unsteadiness.

Always consult a doctor before beginning balance exercises, or if you suspect balance issues are stemming from an illness or condition. With practice and patience, older adults can remain independent and prevent falls.

Sonia Rapaport is a physical therapist and rehabilitation instructor with the Visiting Nurse Service of New York and its private pay affiliate [Partners in Care](#). For more information please visit www.Partnersin-CareNY.org or www.VNSNY.org, or call (212) 609-7700.