

# Preventing falls at home

With many of us now staying at home, it's more important than ever to protect yourself from falls or accidents in the home. The experts share their tips

According to the Health Service Executive (HSE), the risk of falling increases with age. One-in-three older people fall every year and two-thirds of them fall again within six months.

Not all falls will result in injury, but a significant number do. For example, 20pc of older adults will require medical attention for a fall. 10pc will experience a serious injury, such as a fracture.

And Danielle Blower, Associate Director, Myhomecare (myhomecare.ie), says with the introduction of Covid-19 restrictions back in March, they have seen an

increase in reported falls. "Confined home environments for people can lead those individuals with mobility and balance impairments, such as Parkinson's and dementia, to experience falls. The decline in physical activity, loneliness and lack of vitamin D are also consequences of social isolation, resulting in an increased risk of falls in our ageing population."

Danielle says other risk factors for falls include: limitations in mobility and undertaking activities of daily living without support and polypharmacy, which is the concurrent use of multiple medications

by a patient. "Those who are taking more than four different types of medication have been shown to be at an increased risk of falling.

"Environmental hazards, such as loose-fitting rugs, uneven floors, inadequate lighting, and stairs without supporting handrails are also risks."

Myhomecare, which provides homecare workers and nurses in people's homes, are using technology and personal care to assess service users in their homes. "This ensures that it's a safe environment for them to live in, but also that their health and wellbeing is monitored to provide us with the earliest indication that an individual may be a fall risk.

"We can detect whether the person is at risk, due to the trend in key measurements

recorded on our remote health platform called ISAAC. The ISAAC platform is a remote health management tool that allows family members, neighbours, friends and other voluntary carers to participate in a circle of care for an individual. It's free to download from the App Store."

## PHYSICAL MOVEMENT

There are also a number of simple ways to reduce the risk of falling at home. Christopher Moore, Clinical Lead Physiotherapist with Spectrum Health (spectrumhealth.ie), an Irish family-owned company which provides allied health services, says taking care of your physical wellbeing is one such way.

"Regular exercise that brings together a mix of strength, flexibility, mobility and balance can have a huge impact on someone's risk of falling. Physically inactive people can lose as much as 3pc to 5pc of their muscle mass each decade after the age of 30. Even if you are active, you'll still have some muscle loss. So, it goes without saying: if you don't use it, you lose it."

Christopher says adults aged 65 and over should aim to be physically active every day. "Any activity is better than none. The more you do the better, even if it's just a light activity, like getting up to make a cup of tea and moving around your home.

"Try to do activities that improve strength, balance and flexibility at least 2/3 days a week, such as lifting weights. And do at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity activity a week, such as brisk walking, or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity activity if you are active, such as aerobics or jogging."

## COGNITIVE CHANGES

Christopher says cognitive changes can also be linked to the risk of falling.

"Cognition refers to the 'higher' brain functions, such as memory and reasoning. About half of all people will not experience any cognitive changes. But for others, the most commonly affected aspects of cognition are memory, attention and concentration, word-finding, speed of information processing, abstract reasoning and problem-solving, for example."

Christopher says many of these aspects can have an effect on the ability to coordinate more complex tasks, both physically and mentally. "It is proven that exercise improves cognitive function, but there are many other easy ways to improve cognitive function, such as actively reading, solving puzzles and playing cards."

If you are concerned that you or a relative may be at risk of having a fall, or if you know someone who has recently had a fall, Christopher says you can request a home hazard assessment.

"During this assessment, a health professional, with experience in falls prevention, visits a person's home to identify potential hazards and provide advice about how to deal with them.

"For example, many older people can benefit from

having bars placed inside their bath to make it easier to get in and out. The health professional carrying out the assessment may also recommend getting a personal alarm system, so that you or your relative can signal for help in the event of a fall. Alternatively, it is a good idea to keep a mobile phone in close reach, reach

so you can phone for help in case you fall."

Danielle Blower of Myhomecare also highlights the importance of talking to someone if you are worried or have a fear of falling. "Maintain your social contacts where possible and make time for friends.

"At Myhomecare, we can ensure you have a detailed home-based risk assessment to support your falls prevention care needs."

## PEACE OF MIND

For anyone who has a relative or friend living alone and is feeling worried about the risk of a fall, Christopher advises being aware of changes to people's functions. "Be conscious of their ability to cope with extended periods of isolation, and how the home environment may cause a risk.

"Encourage physical exercises. Regular changes from light to moderate to vigorous activity will keep the body energised and the mind sharp."

You can also consult a Chartered Physiotherapist with falls management experience to implement a range of balance, strength and mobility exercises, to aid in the implementation of a falls prevention programme. "Spectrum Health provides an innovative and proactive musculoskeletal (MSK) and mobility assessment, aimed at detecting joint, muscle and balance (falls risk) issues, before they can cause further injury. The assessment is delivered by a Chartered Physiotherapist."

Christopher adds to consider the 'What if?' question. "Getting a plan in place is key in relation to the 'what if?' question. If someone falls, how would that person get help? Personal alarms, smartwatches, and mobile phones are all great additions to help keep everyone safe and give the person and family involved peace of mind."



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