



HEALTH NEWS FROM DR. YU

Thurston County Public Health & Social Services Department

Preventing Falls

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Falls can be a serious concern for older adults. It is the leading cause of injury for those ages 65 and older, with injury rates highest among those over 75. Luckily, there is a lot we can do to help prevent falls.

One of the first things is to exercise regularly. Focus particularly on exercise that strengthens leg muscles and improves balance. Tai Chi is one good example. Exercise is also a great stress release and may be a fun way to socialize, among its other benefits. Weight-bearing exercise along with getting enough calcium and vitamin D can help lower the risk of hip fracture.

The next fall prevention area to take a close look at is home safety. Just as you probably childproofed your home when young children lived there, now is the time to **“fall-proof”** your space.

- Keep items that are used often in easy to reach spots.
- Remove throw rugs, and be sure area rugs lie flat and have non-skid backing.
- Get rid of clutter, especially things that might cause a trip.
- Check for shoes, dangling cords, boxes, or other objects.
- Keep stairs and pathways clear, well lit, and debris-free.
- Be sure there are sturdy handrails on stairs.

In the bathroom, add grab bars to the tub and shower, and near the toilet. Are there non-slip surfaces in good repair on the floor of the tub and shower? Consider a bathing chair for even more stability.

Canes or walkers can be helpful. They improve balance, make mobility safer, and can allow more independence. There is a wide variety of styles available. There is the classic single cane, a quad cane with four feet, and even canes with seats. These are very nice when one has to wait in line! Walkers can come with wheels or not. Other features include seats, brakes, and baskets or pockets to help carry your stuff.

Sadly, tripping over pets sends thousands of people to the emergency room each year. Pet toys and food dishes can also become trip hazards. When balancing the companionship a pet provides with the risk of falling, consider how strongly a leashed dog pulls when walked, how well behaved the pet is, and how much support is available.

Check in with your doctor. Some medications can make you dizzy, drowsy, or cause light-headedness. Bring all your medications, including over-the-counter medications and any herbal products, with you to the doctor appointment. Get a yearly eye exam. Poor vision greatly increases the risk of falling. Normal aging changes our depth perception and ability to see contrast.

Falls are often caused by hazards that are easy to overlook and easy to fix. Take some time to take a closer look at your home or at the home of an older friend or family member. A little action now might prevent a painful fall and hospital stay.

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