



# Falls in the Home<sup>1</sup>

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Ohio State University Extension<sup>2</sup>

Falls are the leading cause of accidental death for the elderly. They account for about half of all accidental deaths in the home. In rural areas, these accidents can be very frightening if a person lives alone. Help is often thirty minutes or more away. In 1989, 500 rural residents in the United States died in their homes due to accidents, and another 80,000 suffered disabling injuries.

Most injuries caused by falls happen at ground level and not from high places. Chances of falling increase when it is dark, when things are not put away, and when spills are not cleaned up quickly. Broken or damaged household items may also result in falls.

You are more likely to fall when you are sick, tired, rushed or emotionally upset. You are also more likely to fall when you are using alcohol or drugs, whether by prescription or not. Many accidents occur because someone has been careless. Not being careless means using a ladder instead of climbing on a chair or table to replace a light bulb or reach another high object. It means carrying small loads up or down stairs instead of carrying one extra large load. These and many other simple suggestions can prevent accidents through keeping a safe home. Some suggestions are in this fact sheet. Check through them to see if there are any you can use to make your home safer for you and your family.

## FLOORS

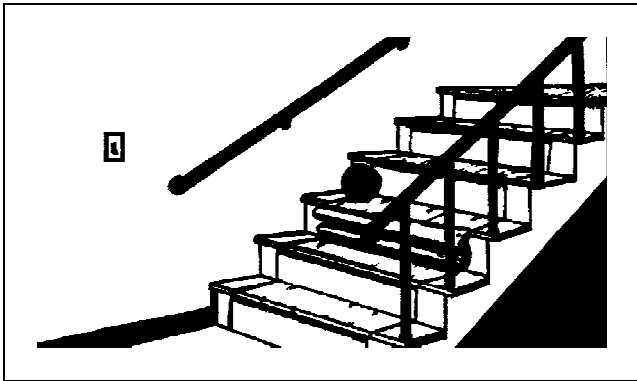
- Keep floors in good repair. Loose boards, slippery throw rugs, frayed carpet and loose kitchen tiles can easily be overlooked until they cause a fall.
- Use throw rugs heavy enough to lie flat, and tape their edges down to keep them from skidding. Use rugs with nonskid backing in places where they cannot be taped down, or simply nail them in place.
- Wipe up spills immediately.
- Don't stretch electrical cords across rooms, and never run extension cords underneath a rug or carpet. Besides causing falls, they could overheat or fray and catch fire.
- Arrange furniture so all the members of your family can move through the house easily.
- Keep floors clear of toys, magazines, or other objects that may be cluttering them. Remember that children, toys and pets are dangerous additions to working areas.
- Never run through the house. You are more likely to slip when rushed.
- Always use cleaning supplies according to their directions.

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## STAIRWAYS AND STEPS

- In 1990, nearly 1 million people required hospital room treatment for falls on stairs and steps. It is as important to keep your stairs in good repair as it is your floors.
- Keep stairs and steps well lit and free of objects. Good lighting is cheap insurance for safety in all traffic areas, especially stairs. Make sure that light switches are accessible from the top and bottom of the stairway. See Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Light switches should be accessible from the stairway.

- Fasten any stair coverings securely.
- Provide sturdy handrails.
- Carry loads that are small enough to not block your vision and allow you a free hand.
- Take your time when going up or down stairs.
- Don't use stairways to store boxes, tools, equipment or odds and ends, even temporarily.
- Use extra care going up or down stairs when wearing high heels, house slippers, long dresses or robes.
- Never use small rugs at the top or bottom of stairways.
- For extra caution, paint the top and bottom steps white. Or, put white stripes on the front edges of steps.
- Mix sand with paint for a rough, non-slip surface on basement or outdoor steps.

- Keep a flashlight handy when using poorly lit stairways.

## KITCHEN

- Keep others out of the kitchen while cleaning hard surface flooring so no one slips and falls on a wet floor.
- Always use a ladder or step stool when reaching for items in cabinets or on shelves. Never use a chair or overreach.
- Walk carefully when handling hot food and food dishes; don't rush.
- Store dishes at an appropriate height.

## BATHROOM

- Be cautious around the wet, slippery surfaces, which are often seen in bathrooms. Keep rubber-backed or taped-down rugs on the floor.
- Use a nonskid mat or self-adhesive nonskid appliques in the bathtub or shower.
- Install grab bars in and out of the bathtub or shower. Have a grab bar system installed around the toilet for household members with disabilities.
- When hanging wet clothes, be sure they drip into the tub or shower and not onto the floor where they could create puddles.
- Install night lights in the bathroom for nighttime visitors.

## BEDROOM

- Sleepy people are more likely to trip over things. Make sure traffic lanes are free of clutter. Install night lights.
- Close any drawers or closet doors after use.

## CHILDREN

- An average of 150 children die of falls each year. This year, one child in four will suffer a preventable injury serious enough to warrant medical attention. Always watch your children, and know where they are. Teach them the hazards that exist in the home.

- Windows are a common hazard for children. Window guards should be installed on upper floors of multi-story homes. Never leave a window wide open; children have fallen out of windows open only five inches!
- If your child has a walker, watch him or her carefully. Walkers can tip and roll down stairs, seriously injuring a child.
- Changing tables should have straps to hold the child. Never leave a child alone on a changing table, even for a moment.
- If you have small children, use gates at the top and bottom of your stairways.
- Old-fashioned accordion stair gates may have holes large enough for babies to poke their heads through. So, although they won't fall down the steps, they may strangle.
- Teach children to pick up their toys.
- Arrange furniture so traffic patterns within rooms are as straight and wide as possible. Keep furniture out of normal traffic areas.
- Close any open drawers, cabinets, doors or closets after use and before going to bed.
- Use a stepladder or step stool to reach high places. However, do not stand on the top step of a stepladder.
- If you must stand on a chair, use a sturdy one with a wide base, solid bottom and a high back. Wear low-heeled shoes. Place the chair as close as possible to the object you are attempting to reach. Stand on the chair near the middle of the seat, with the back in front of you.

### **SOURCES**

National Safety Council, *Accident Facts* (1990 Edition).

"A Menace for the Very Young: the Shopping Cart," *New York Times* (May 31, 1991).

Neal Ashby, "Redbook's Home Accident Prevention Guide for Parents," *Redbook*, V 176 (December 1990), 83-86.

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### **OTHER THINGS YOU CAN DO**

- Clothing can cause a fall. Reduce chances of falling by wearing shoes with pliable soles and low heels. Short garments or pants are safer to wear around the house than long dresses or robes.
- Install night lights throughout the house. Some plug into a socket, but all are cheap to buy and operate.