

# Fall Prevention Guidebook



**Stay Active, Stay Strong,  
Stay Standing!**

## Why Fall Prevention Is Important:

Falls are the leading cause of injury among older Americans. Every year nearly one third of older adults experience a fall, and in Massachusetts, falls are the leading cause of injury related hospital stays and emergency room visits. It is important to understand that Falls are not just a “sign of aging.” Falls can be a sign of a new medical issue, muscle weakness, a balance problem, or medication side effects. Falls can be the result of your environment, like a slippery floor or a scatter rug. The good news is that **preventing falls is one of the most important things we can do to maintain our independence as we age!** Moreover, **MOST FALLS ARE PREVENTABLE!** This is great news, and it means that by taking a little care and making some simple changes, we can greatly reduce the risk of falling!

## YOUR HEALTH

Your health is a key component of Fall Prevention.

### Quiz yourself:

1. Do I eat enough fruits and vegetables and drink enough water?
2. Am I physically active at least several times a week?
3. Do I have my vision checked yearly?
4. Have I discussed my medications with my doctor?
5. Do I ever feel dizzy or lightheaded upon standing?

**If you answered “No” to questions 1-4, or “Yes” to question 5 you may be at increased risk of suffering a fall.**

**Did you know** that there are some health issues that can increase your chance of falling?

**Stroke, Parkinson’s disease, and Arthritis** can affect your ability to move and catch yourself from stumbling.

**Diabetes** may make you feel faint or dizzy if you have unstable blood sugar levels. It can also cause problems with eyesight and can reduce feeling in feet and legs. This can make it more difficult to move safely.

**Short Term Illness** such as the flu or surgery can cause confusion, dizziness, and difficulty walking while you are sick, and even for a few days afterward.

**Incontinence** may cause you to rush to the toilet, increasing the risk of falling (especially at night)

## VISION

As we age our eyesight gets weaker. It may take our eyes longer to adjust to changes in light and less able to judge distance and depth.

Steps you can take:

- Have your eyes checked by your doctor or optometrist every year to maintain optimal vision.
- Be extra cautious when wearing bifocals, they can make walking a bit difficult.

If lighting levels change suddenly, give your eyes time to fully adjust before moving around.

## PHYSICAL FITNESS

Being active is very important or avoiding falls. Inactive or unfit people tend to have poorer balance and weaker muscles. It is common for people who feel unsteady to do less walking, making you more likely to fall because your muscles become weaker, and joints become stiffer.

### Physical activity reduces your risk of falling by:

- Improving balance.
- Improving muscle strength and flexibility.
- Increasing energy levels.
- Keeping your bones strong.
- Helping to control blood pressure, blood sugar levels and weight.

### Steps you can take:

- Try to remain as active as possible. There are many exercises which may be done sitting or standing that can help to improve strength and balance.
- Consider joining a fitness class, balance class, or starting a walking routine with a friend.
- Try an exercise tape that can be done in the home.
- Even house chores can count as activity, so enjoy yourself by doing something you love like playing with the grandkids, gardening, or even dancing.

**Always talk to your doctor before beginning any exercise program.**

To learn more about where you can sign up for exercise, fitness and/or balance classes, see page 14 in this guidebook.

**Stay Active, Stay Strong, Stay Standing!**

## OSTEOPOROSIS

This is a condition that results in thin, weak bones. People who have osteoporosis are more likely to break or fracture a bone if they fall.

### Steps you can take:

- Make certain you get the recommended amount of Calcium and Vitamin D. Calcium strengthens your bones and Vitamin D strengthens both bones and muscle.
- Physical activity can help to strengthen bones. Be active and have fun!
- Talk to your doctor or a nutritionist if you think a calcium supplement may be right for you.
- Limit your alcohol intake.
- If you smoke—stop. Smoking interferes with building healthy bones.

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## LOW BLOOD PRESSURE

Many people experience a drop in blood pressure when they stand up which can lead to light-headedness, dizziness, or unsteadiness.

### Steps you can take:

- Stand up slowly after lying down or sitting. This will allow your blood pressure to adjust more slowly and prevent any dizziness.
- Take extra care when bending down.
- Always make sure you feel steady and secure before walking.

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## MEDICATIONS

Some medications can cause side effects that increase your risk of falling. Taking four or more medicines also increases your risk for a fall.

### Steps you can take:

- Notify your doctor right away if you are experiencing any side effects with your medications (drowsiness, confusion, dizziness, etc.).
- Be sure to tell your doctor ALL medications you are taking including over-the-counter drugs and any herbal supplements. Be sure to carry your medication list with you and share the list with all your healthcare providers.
- Always follow all of the instructions on your medications.
- Consider having a “Checklist for a Medication Checkup” on page 13 of this guidebook.
- If you smoke—stop. Smoking interferes with building healthy bones.

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## NUTRITION

Staying healthy is essential to staying standing! Improper nutrition can make us feel weak and tired.

### Steps you can take:

- Eat a wide variety of fruits and vegetables to ensure a good balance of vitamins and minerals.
- Drink plenty of water to stay hydrated.
- If you have osteoporosis, eating more foods with calcium such as milk or cheese can help keep your bones strong.
- Talk to your doctor or a nutritionist if you think a dietary supplement is right for you.
- Even a small amount of alcohol can lead to unsteadiness when walking and slow your reaction time. Drink responsibly and take extra care while moving around after drinking.

## COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR DOCTOR

One important thing to remember is that if you have a fall or have a near fall; you need to **talk to your doctor** as soon as possible. Do not assume that a doctor is too busy to listen. Patients are a doctor's first priority. When you speak with your doctor try to give them as much information regarding the fall as possible such as: what time of day it was, what you were doing at the time, and how you were feeling just before. The doctor may be able to identify the cause of the fall and may even be able to make a small change that will make a **world of difference**.

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## KNOW YOUR ENVIRONMENT!

Most falls happen in the home. Educating yourself about the possible risks around your home and taking simple steps to avoid them will help you keep standing tall. Consider speaking with your doctor about a "**home assessment**." They are usually conducted by a healthcare professional and are meant to help you identify risk factors in your home. Often when ordered by a doctor, home assessments will be covered by insurance.

### Quiz Yourself:

1. Have I looked around my home to identify possible hazards?
2. Do I always wear appropriate footwear?
3. Do I take extra care in the bathroom and use safety measures such as grab bars to keep myself safe?
4. Do I have proper lighting in and around my home?
5. Do I take extra care to keep my home free of clutter and other tripping hazards?

If you answered **NO** to any of the above questions you may be at an increased risk for a fall. Consider discussing fall prevention strategies with your doctor.

## AROUND THE HOUSE

Although many of us know our houses inside and out, it is a good idea to do a walk through to try identifying possible risk factors. Having a friend or family member do this may also help to identify problems we don't notice.

### Steps you can take:

- Bring frequently used items down to the lower shelves to avoid reaching and stepstools.
  - Keep all electrical cords around the edges of the room.
  - Keep walkways free of clutter.
  - Make sure rugs are secured with double stick tape or nonskid pads.
  - Keep a close eye on your pets. They like to stay close, so check where they are **before** walking around.
  - Ensure that you have proper lighting, especially in stairwells and hallways.
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## STAIRS

Stairs can be dangerous to people of all ages. Take extra caution to stay safe!

### Steps you can take:

- Install non-skid tape on the edges of stairs.
- Mark stair edges with brightly colored tape or paint to make them easier to see, as our eyes have trouble judging depth as we age.
- Have handrails installed so that you can always hold on.
- DO NOT** try to carry too many things up or down stairs, **saving time is not worth risking safety**.
- Always turn the light on before going up or down stairs. If possible, have a light switch installed at both the top and bottom of the stairs or consider battery-operated lights that can be mounted on the wall.

## BATHROOM

The bathroom can be a dangerous place, slippery floors and high showers and tub greatly increase the risk of falling. But don't be afraid, there are **easy steps** you can take to be safe!

### Steps you can take:

- Use non-slip mats in the shower and floor to avoid slipping on wet surfaces.
- Have grab bars installed to make standing up from the toilet and entering and exiting the shower easier.
- Ensure that doors open outward so that you can always be reached in case of a fall.
- Consider using a bath gel instead of a bar of soap that can create a hazard if dropped.
- Use a shower seat to make getting in and out of the shower safer.
- If you have a high tub, sit on the edge of the tub, and swing your legs in to enter and exit the tub, instead of trying to step up into the tub.
- Consider having a handheld shower head put in so that you can sit down to shower.
- Check bathmats to ensure that they have a non-slip backing.

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## BEDROOM

Getting a good night rest is important. Keeping your bedroom safe will keep you sleeping soundly and free from worry.

### Steps you can take:

- Avoid long robes or nightgowns to prevent tripping.
- Consider having nightlights installed.
- Always turn the lights on before getting up to go to the bathroom.
- Make your bed. It will be more inviting when you're ready for bed and will prevent tripping on quilts and bedspreads.

## FOOTWEAR

Proper shoes help to keep our feet firmly planted on the floor and can minimize slipping.

### Steps you can take:

- Shoes that fit firmly and comfortably with a thin sole and low heel will help your feet to feel changes in walking surfaces. Also remember a good tread is important to prevent slipping.
- Avoid slippers, stockings and socks as they do not provide the grip or support necessary to stay standing.

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## OUTSIDE

Being outside is a great way to relax and entertain friends. It's also a great place to work on your fitness by gardening or even just walking around the neighborhood. Just remember to keep safety in mind to stay safe and standing outdoors.

### Steps you can take:

- Pay attention to your surroundings and don't rush. You'll enjoy your time outside more.
- Wear proper footwear.
- Always roll up the hoses and put away gardening tools to avoid tripping.
- Keep pathways clear of moss, slime, and fallen leaves.
- Consider a walking aid. Outdoor surfaces are often un-even and a walking aid can provide some support.
- Be extra cautious on buses and trains. Always sit or hold onto the railings when the vehicle is in motion.

## BEING PREPARED

Most of us don't want to even think about falling, but the truth is we will be much safer if we think carefully about ways to stay standing. This includes having an action plan in case we do suffer a fall.

### Things to Consider:

- If I fall and am injured or cannot get up, how will I contact help?
  - Cordless or mobile phones are a great option. They can be kept in your pocket around the house so that you may call for help.
  - Personal Emergency Response Systems are another option. They are worn around the wrist or neck as a pendant. These devices are linked to an operator who can check on you or contact emergency services if needed. All you need to do in an emergency is push the button.
  - Consider setting up a system with a friend or neighbor. Check in on each other every day. That way someone will know to call for help if you are unreachable.
- If I fall and am injured or cannot get up, how will help access my home?
  - Consider leaving a spare key with a nearby friend or neighbor.
  - If you do not feel comfortable giving a key to someone, consider hiding a spare key outside or investing in a spare key box with a combination lock that you can tell about to friends or emergency workers when they arrive.
  - If you do fall, remain calm. Check yourself for injuries and if you feel you can, stand up VERY SLOWLY. Rest afterwards. Discuss the fall with your doctor as soon as possible.

**Have a Plan** - Use the next two pages to plan ways to reduce your risk of falling **AND** to plan how to get help if you should have a fall.

## MY PLAN TO REDUCE MY RISK:

### I will speak with my doctor about:

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### I will make the following changes:

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**MY PLAN TO GET HELP IF NEEDED:**

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## CHECKLIST FOR A MEDICATION CHECK-UP:

Did you know you could be at risk for a fall if you check any of the following:

I take five or more medications

I am taking over the counter medications, herbals and/or supplements

I see more than one physician

I use more than one pharmacy

I have recently experienced a fall

I take medications for:

anxiety       depression       sleep

seizures       pain       diabetes

thyroid       heart/blood pressure

If you checked any of the above, you should consider having a medication check-up. You can call the MCPHS Pharmacy Outreach Program of Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, at (866) 633-1617 (toll free) and they can review your medications with you.

## RESOURCES FOR FITNESS & BALANCE PROGRAMS

Many Councils on Aging - Senior Centers offer classes and services such as aerobics, Zumba, ballroom dancing, Silversneakers®, line dancing, Tai Chi, yoga, meditation, Walking Clubs, Strength and Balance Exercise, osteoporosis prevention exercise, and Matter of Balance Workshop. Contact the Council on Aging for the most up to date in information. Or visit [www.healthyliving4me.org](http://www.healthyliving4me.org) to find a Healthy Living Program.

### **Worcester Senior Center**

128 Providence Street, Worcester, MA 01604

508-799-1232

### **YMCA of Worcester, Central Branch**

766 Main Street, Worcester, MA 01610

508-755-6101

### **YMCA, Greendale Branch**

75 Shore Drive, Worcester, MA 01605

508-852-6694

### **YWCA of Central Massachusetts**

1 Salem Square, Worcester, MA 01608

508-767-2505

### **Jewish Community Center**

633 Salisbury Street, Worcester, MA 01609

508-756-7109

## **RESOURCES FOR FITNESS & BALANCE PROGRAMS**

### **AUBURN COUNCIL ON AGING (508) 832-7799**

4 Goddard Drive, Auburn, MA 01501

### **BARRE COUNCIL ON AGING (978) 355-5004**

557 South Barre Road, Barre, MA 01005

### **GRAFTON COUNCIL ON AGING (508) 839-9242**

30 Providence Road, Grafton, MA 01519

### **HOLDEN COUNCIL ON AGING (508) 210-5570**

1130 Main Street, Holden, MA 01520

### **LEICESTER COUNCIL ON AGING (508) 892-7016**

40 Winslow Avenue, Leicester, MA 01524

### **MILLBURY SENIOR CENTER (508) 865-9154**

1 River Street, Millbury, MA 01527

### **OAKHAM COUNCIL ON AGING (508) 882-5251**

2 Coldbrook Road, Oakham, MA 01068

### **PAXTON SENIOR CENTER (508) 756-2833**

17 West Street, Paxton, MA 01612

### **RUTLAND SENIOR CENTER (508) 886-7945**

53 Glenwood Road, Rutland, MA 01543

### **SHREWSBURY SENIOR CENTER (508) 841-8640**

98 Maple Avenue, Shrewsbury, MA 01545

### **WEST BOYLSTON SENIOR CENTER (508) 835-6916**

120 Prescott Street, West Boylston, MA 01583

## **COMMUNITY RESOURCES FOR SENIORS**

### **Elder Services of Worcester Area, Inc.**

67 Millbrook Street, Suite 100

Worcester, MA 01606

508-756-1545

[www.eswa.org](http://www.eswa.org)

### **City of Worcester**

Elder Affair Division/Senior Center

128 Providence Street, Worcester, MA 01604

508-799-1232

<http://www.worcesterma.gov/senior-center>

### **Central Mass Housing Alliance**

Elder Home Repair Program

6 Institute Road, Worcester, MA 01609

508-752-5519

[www.cmhaonline.org](http://www.cmhaonline.org)

### **Mass College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences**

**Pharmacy Outreach Program**

25 Foster Street, Worcester, MA 01608

1-866-633-1617

<https://www.mcphs.edu/patient-centers-and-clinics/pharmacy-outreach-program>

### **St. Paul's Elder Outreach Program**

19 Chatham Street, Worcester, MA 01609

508-799-5009

## **FALL PREVENTION RESOURCES**

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**  
[www.cdc.gov/Falls/](http://www.cdc.gov/Falls/)

**Fall Prevention Center of Excellence**  
<https://homemods.org/resources/>

**Healthy Living Center of Excellence**  
280 Merrimack Street  
Suite 400  
Lawrence, MA 01843  
978-946-1211  
[www.healthyliving4me.org](http://www.healthyliving4me.org)

**National Council on Aging – Falls Prevention**  
[www.ncoa.org/older-adults/health/prevention/falls-prevention](http://www.ncoa.org/older-adults/health/prevention/falls-prevention)

**NIH – National Institute on Aging  
Go4Life**  
[www.nia.nih.gov/health/topics/exercise-and-physical-activity](http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/topics/exercise-and-physical-activity)

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