

If you fall or witness a fall, do you know what to do?

We all fall from time to time. With age, both the number of falls and the likelihood of injury increase. So, it's important to know what to do if you fall or if you see someone else fall.

Reacting properly to a fall can make the difference between a "serious" fall and a "less serious" one. It often helps to decrease its physical and psychological consequences. It enables you to regain your confidence more quickly and to continue to be as independent as possible.

A few facts

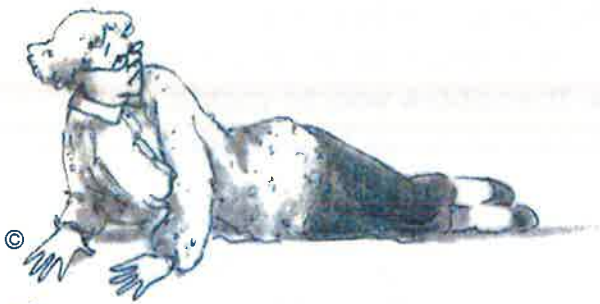
- One-third of seniors (age 65 and over) have a fall every year; half of them have more than one fall.
- Falls are the most common cause of injury among seniors.
- Seniors are nine times more likely to be hurt in a fall than someone under age 65.
- Nearly two-thirds of injury-related hospitalizations for seniors are the result of falls.
- Roughly half of all falls occur at home.



What to do after a *fall...* if you **CAN** get up

The first thing to do is to catch your breath. Check and see if you are injured. Even if you think you're OK, take your time before getting up again.

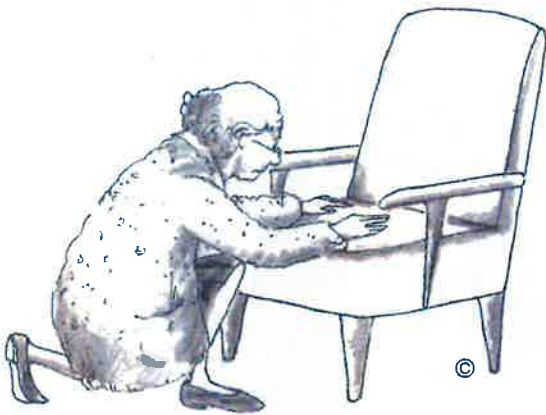
Follow these five steps for getting up:



1 Lie on your side; bend the leg that is on top and lift yourself onto your elbows or hands.



2 Pull yourself toward an armchair or other sturdy object, then kneel while placing both hands on the chair or object.



3 Place your stronger leg in front, holding on to the chair or object.



4 Stand up.

5 Very carefully, turn and sit down.



Most of all, stay calm.

“ Practice these steps often and be prepared in case you fall. ”

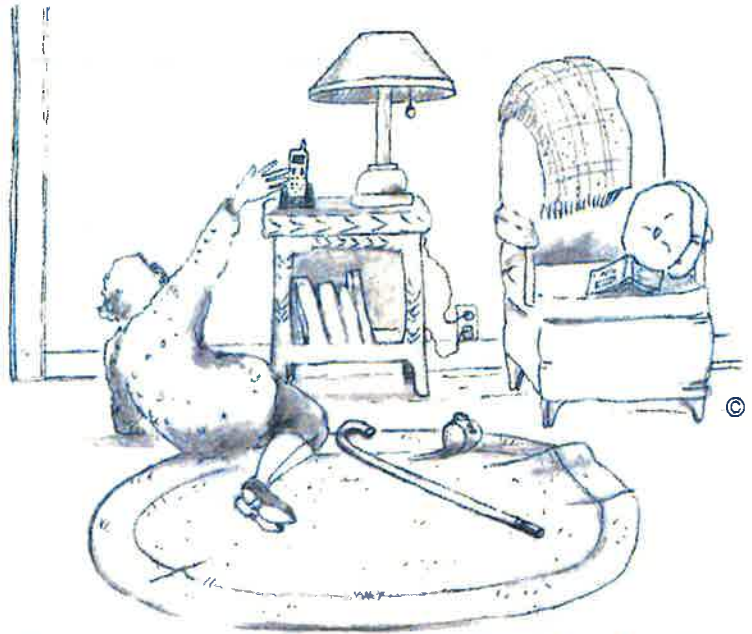
What to do after a *fall*... if you **CANNOT** get up

If you feel any discomfort or are unable to get up, try to get help.

1 Call out for help if you think you can be heard.

2 If you have an emergency call device or telephone at hand, use it.

3 If you don't, try to slide yourself towards a telephone or a place where you will be heard.



4 Make noise with your cane or another object to attract attention.

5 Wait for help in the most comfortable position for you.



6 If you can, place a pillow under your head and cover yourself with a piece of clothing or a blanket to stay warm.

7 Try to move your joints to ease circulation and prevent stiffness.

What to do after a *fall*... if you are the **WITNESS**

If you see someone fall, resist the urge to get the person up immediately. First check for condition: is the person conscious or unconscious? Does the person appear to be injured? Reassure the person.

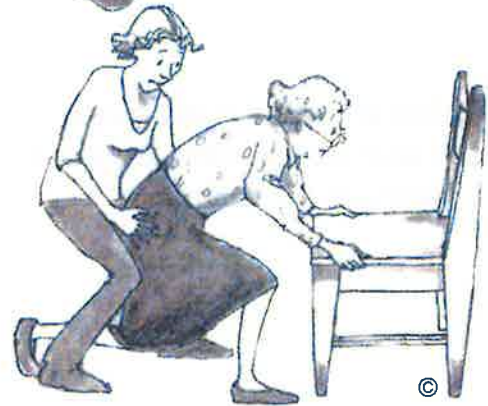
If the individual cannot get up, call for help and administer first aid if you are able to do so. Help the person find a comfortable position and keep him or her warm using an item of clothing or blanket.

If the individual appears able to get up, proceed with care and follow the steps below:

- 1** Bring a chair close by; help the person turn onto the side and bend the upper leg; help the person into a semi-seated position.



- 2** Placing yourself behind the person and getting a firm grip on the hips, help the person to a kneeling position with both hands on the chair.



- 3** Holding on to the chair, the person should then place the stronger leg in front. You may help by guiding his or her leg.

- 4** With a firm grip on the hips, help the person to stand, then turn and sit on the chair.



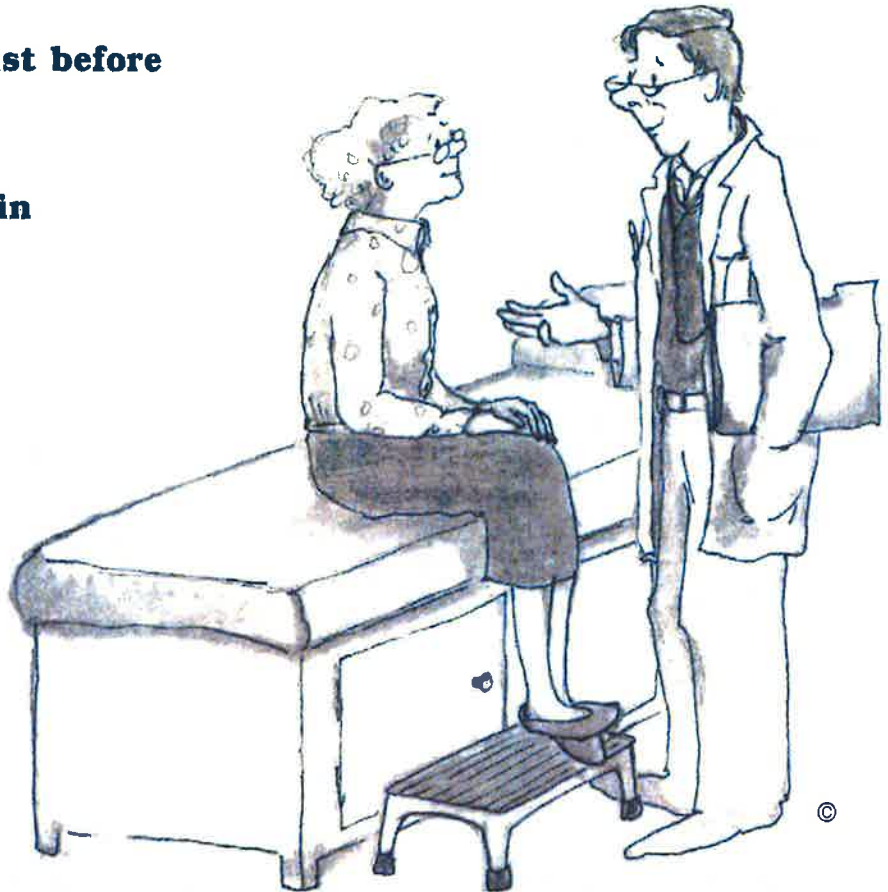
When to see a doctor

Whether you're the victim or the witness of a fall, never underestimate its seriousness. Even if it appears no harm was done, there could be after-effects.

Here are some of the reasons for **seeing a doctor**:

- **loss of consciousness just before or after the fall**
- **injuries**
- **a strong or lingering pain**
- **dizziness**
- **nausea**
- **overall weakness**
- **headaches**
- **vision problems**

Symptoms may appear in the days that follow a fall. If you fall, take note of your condition. If you witness a fall, take note of the person's condition.



In some cases, a fall may be the sign of an illness, or it may be caused by medication. It's always better to mention falls to your doctor. He or she can then assess the situation and see if the fall is linked to an illness, prescribed medication or over-the-counter drugs.

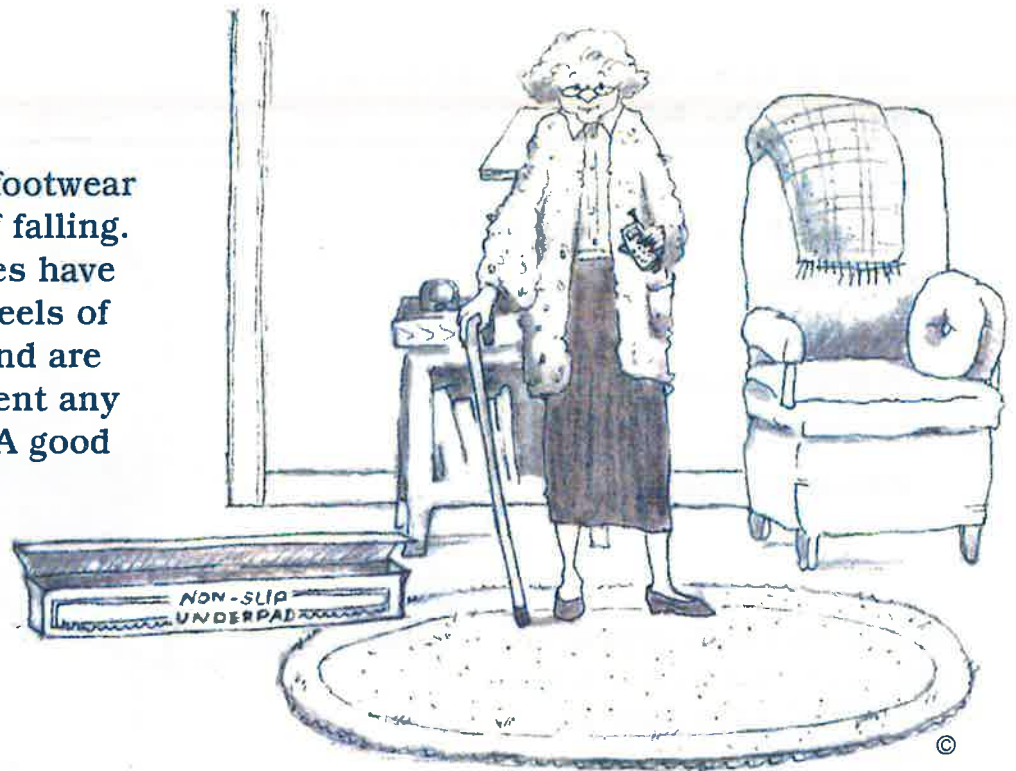
Preventing another fall

Surroundings

It's a good idea to check your environment to discover any fall hazards, particularly if you have had a fall. Simple changes to prevent falls include grab bars, non-slip rugs and a handrail on both sides of stairs.

Shoes

Wearing unsuitable footwear increases the risk of falling. Make sure your shoes have non-slip soles and heels of reasonable height, and are wide enough to prevent any twisting of the foot. A good heel cup that goes around the back of the heel also stabilizes the ankle.



Taking precautions

Thinking about your fall, come up with a plan so that you'll feel in control for the future. Share this plan with your family and neighbours. Consider getting an emergency call device or always have a cordless phone close at hand, especially if you fall often. Ask a friend or a family member to phone you at regular intervals, or get this service from a company or a volunteer centre. Give your keys to someone you trust who could use them in an emergency. In short, think about what you can do to get help if you have a fall.

Consequences of a fall: the physical aftermath

A fall is often accompanied by physical complications. As a matter of fact, falls are the most common cause of injury among seniors.

Besides bruises and scrapes, one-third of seniors who fall suffer fractures or muscle damage. They can also develop pneumonia, blood clots or other after-effects after they lie on the ground for an extended period.

Hip fractures are the most common injury. Among people over age 65, approximately 40% of fall-related injuries resulting in hospitalization are due to hip fractures.



Consequences of a fall: the psychological aftermath

It's normal to be more cautious after a fall, but the fear of falling again may lead you to restrict your activities. This is a vicious circle: the less active you are, the more your strength and flexibility decrease, which increases your risk for falling. What's more, if you isolate yourself because you feel vulnerable, the reduced social contacts may undermine your spirits.

Discussing your fear of falling with your family or with health professionals should help diminish your fear. A physiotherapist can also suggest various rehabilitation exercises that will help you.

Taking a fall brings your physical limitations to the surface and may jeopardize your independence. It's a difficult experience to go through. Knowing the potential consequences of a fall and knowing what to do will set you on the path to a faster physical recovery and a return to enjoying life.



Find out more

- View the many publications about falls by the Division of Aging and Seniors, Public Health Agency of Canada, including the brochure *You CAN prevent falls* www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines
You can also order by telephone by calling **613-952-7606**
- Visit the fall prevention site of the *Institut universitaire de gériatrie de Montréal*, www.vieillissement.ca