

# Preventing Falls and Fires: A Handbook for Seniors



Developed by the Alabama Department of Public Health  
Bureau of Health Promotion and Chronic Disease  
Injury Prevention Division



# Introduction

People ages 65 and older are twice as likely to die or be injured by falls and fires than the population at large. Knowing what to do to prevent fires and falls is your best protection.

Even if you have physical limitations, you can still protect yourself. Look for hazards in your home. Keep in contact with your family, friends and neighbors and look out for each other. Know the emergency numbers in your area.

Read on to learn more about how to protect yourself by taking some easy precautions located in this quick reference guide.

**Remember falls and fires may be prevented!**

# Falls

Falls are the leading cause of injury deaths among people 65 years and older. 60% of these falls occur at home, 30% occur in public places and 10% occur in health care institutions. The risk of falling increases with age and is greater for women than for men. When a fall occurs, two-thirds of the individuals will fall again within six months.

Falls are often due to hazards that are easy to overlook, but easy to fix. There are various steps that you can take to make sure that hazards are avoided. The more you know about the risk factors or causes of falls, the more you can prevent them. Falls are not a normal part of aging, however, they can be prevented. This brochure provides some key risk factors or causes of falls among older adults. This is not a comprehensive list, but does look at the most frequent causes.



# Prevention Efforts in the Home:

## Living, Dining and Family Rooms Floors

- Use a television remote control and a cordless phone.
- Make sure chairs and couches are easy to get in and out of.
- Remove caster wheels from furniture.
- Make sure your walking path is clear.
- Move furniture if necessary.
- Make sure rugs have non-slip backing or use double-sided tape.
- Pick up things that are on the floor such as papers, magazines, towels.
- Coil wires next to the wall so that you can't trip over them.

## Stairs and Steps

- Always keep objects off the stairs.
- Fix loose or uneven steps.
- Have a handyman or electrician install an overhead light at the top and bottom of the stairs.
- Make sure there is a light switch at each end of the stairs for easy access.
- Make sure handrails are on both sides of the stairs and are as long as the stairs.
- Make sure carpet on the stairs is secure.

## Kitchen

- Rearrange your shelves. Keep things you use often on the lower shelves.
- Use a step stool for higher items. Make sure it has a bar to hold on to. Never use a chair as a step stool.
- Avoid using floor polish or wax in order to reduce slick surfaces.
- Make sure appliance cords are out of the way.

## Bedrooms

- Place a lamp close to the bed where it is easy to reach.
- Put in a nightlight so you can see the pathway from the bedroom to the bathroom.
- Locate a telephone within reach of the bed.
- Adjust bed height to make it easy to get in and out of.
- Have a firm chair with arms to sit and dress.

## Bathrooms

- Put a non-slip rubber mat or self-stick strips on the floor of the tub or shower to prevent slipping.
- Have a handyman or carpenter install a grab bar inside the tub and next to the toilet for support when you get in and out of the tub or up from the toilet.
- Add a padded bath or shower seat.
- Install a raised toilet seat if needed.

## Outdoors

- Repair cracks and abrupt edges of sidewalks and driveways.
- Install handrails on stairs and steps.
- Remove high doorway thresholds. Trim shrubbery along the pathway to the home.
- Keep walk areas clear of clutter, rocks and tools.
- Keep walk areas clear of snow and ice.
- Install adequate lighting by doorways and along walkways leading to doors.

## Other things you can do to prevent falls:

### Exercise regularly

- Exercise makes you stronger and improves your balance and coordination. This can be done by walking, swimming, gardening, yoga or even Tai Chi. These are slow paced and low impact, yet build strength and balance. Exercise at least fifteen minutes every other day. Regular exercise will help you sleep better as well. Failure to exercise regularly results in poor muscle tone, decreased strength, and loss of bone mass and flexibility. These contribute to falls and the severity of injury due to falls.



## Medications

- Have your doctor or pharmacist look at all the medicines you take. Some can make you sleepy or dizzy which may cause you to fall. Remove all out-of-date medications and those you no longer use.

## Vision

- Have your vision checked at least once a year by an eye doctor. Poor vision can increase your risk of falling.
- Cataracts and glaucoma alter depth perception, visual acuity, peripheral vision and susceptibility to glare. These limitations hinder your ability to safely negotiate your environment, whether it is in your own home or in a shopping mall.

## Instruments

- Assistive devices such as canes, walkers and wheelchairs may help you get around obstacles without incident and prevent a disabling injury.

## Pets

- Somehow these precious little creatures manage to get under our feet and can cause a fall. Be aware of where your pet is and be careful when visiting others who have pets too.

## General Tips:

- Get up slowly after you sit or lie down. High blood pressure and heart problems can cause dizziness that can lead to falls. Remember to get up from a laying down position slowly if you have heart problems or high blood pressure.
- Wear sturdy shoes with thin, non-slip soles. Avoid slippers and running shoes with thick soles.
- Improve lighting in your home. Use brighter light bulbs. Use lamp shades or frosted bulbs to reduce glare.
- Paint doorsills a different color to prevent tripping.
- Put a phone near the floor in case you fall and can't get up.
- Think about wearing an alarm device that will bring help in case you fall and can't get up on your own.

# FIRE SAFETY

Senior adults, ages 65 +, are among the greatest group to suffer from fire related deaths and injuries. Most of these deaths and injuries are due to a home fire. Older adults are more at risk due to decreased mobility, sight, hearing, and health.

However, there are special precautions that you can take to protect you and your home from a fire. The more you know about the risk factors or causes of fires, the greater the probability of avoiding such occurrences from happening to you. This brochure lays out some key risk factors of fires among older adults. This is not a comprehensive list, but does look at the most frequent causes.



## COOKING

A majority of kitchen fires occur because of food being left unattended. If you must leave the kitchen while cooking, take a spoon or a potholder to remind you to return to the kitchen. Always wear fitted clothing while cooking. Heat cooking oil gradually and be mindful when deep-frying. Never pour water on a grease fire. Instead, cover the pan with a lid to smother the fire. Always turn pot handles in. Keep kitchen appliances clean and avoid storing anything in and around them.

## ELECTRICITY

Routinely check electrical appliances and wiring for frayed and damaged wiring. Replace any damaged cording immediately. Never overload extension cords and outlets. Keep electrical appliances away from water sources and be extra careful in bathrooms and kitchens. Make sure that all electric blankets and appliances are lab approved.

## HEATING

Maintain heating sources by cleaning them annually and checking them for frayed or damaged cording. Only buy Underwriter's Laboratory (UL) approved heating equipment. Keep combustible materials such as curtains, clothing, and paints at least three feet from any heating device. Shut off all heating equipment before leaving a room.

### Wood Stoves

Use seasoned wood not green wood, artificial logs, or trash. Inspect and clean pipes and chimneys annually.

### Electric Space Heaters

Check for a control mechanism that will switch the heater off automatically if it falls or becomes too hot. Never use electric heaters in bathrooms or other sources of water. Always unplug heaters when not in use.



### Kerosene Heaters

Use crystal clear K-1 kerosene not gasoline or camp stove fuel. Be careful not to overfill the heater with fuel. Always use kerosene heaters in a well-ventilated room.

## Fireplaces

Clean fireplaces regularly and remove any debris. Check to make sure that the damper is open before starting a fire. Never burn trash, green wood, or paper in a fireplace. Use screens that are heavy enough to hold a rolling log and large enough to cover the opening and catch flying sparks. Never wear loose clothing near an open flame. Always make sure that the fire is completely out before leaving your home or going to bed.

## Candles

Keep candles, matches, and lighters out of the reach of children. Never display lighted candles in windows or near exits. Also keep pets away from lit candles.

## SMOKING

Never smoke in bed or near an oxygen source, gas stove, or other flammable objects. Do not leave smoking materials unattended and keep cigarettes, lighters, and matches away from children. Use ashtrays with wide lips and empty them into a toilet or metal container before going to bed.

## YARD MAINTENANCE

Keep lawns trimmed, leaves raked, and remove debris from rain-gutters. Thin trees and bushes around your home. Store firewood at least thirty feet away from your home as well as combustibles like paints and solvents. Notify the local fire department when burning yard waste and obtain a permit when burning in a wooded area.

## SMOKE ALARMS

Maintain your smoke alarm by testing it monthly and changing the battery at least once per year. Install smoke alarms just outside bedrooms and other sleeping areas. Avoid placing smoke alarms in bathrooms and kitchens. Smoke alarms with vibrating pads or flashing lights are available for those who can not hear or see well.



## BE PREPARED

Plan at least two escape routes from every room in your home. If you use a walker or wheelchair, check to be sure that they can easily fit through doorways. Practice opening locked or barred windows and doors. Know the telephone numbers of emergency providers in your area and contact them if you have special needs in case of an emergency. Ask them to keep your special needs on file. If you live in a multi-story home, arrange sleeping areas to be on the ground floor and near an exit. In case of a fire, do not waste time saving property and valuables. Get out and stay out!

For more information contact:

Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH) at 1-800-252-1818

American Red Cross of Central Alabama  
at 1-800-260-8680

Central Alabama Aging Consortium (CAAC) at 1-800-264-4680



Funded by cooperative grants  
U17/CCU419368-03 and U17/CCUK15917-06 from the  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.