

## Falls and Balance Problems

by Laurence Z. Rubenstein, MD, MPH, AGSF, MD, MPH, AGSF, UCLA School of Medicine

Many people experience increasing difficulty with balance and safe mobility as they age, which leads to the common and serious problem of falls. These problems are associated with loss of confidence and decreasing ability to function independently and can lead to the consideration of institutional care. Falls are also a major cause of death in the older population. Fortunately, most causes of falls and instability can be treated successfully, with improved mobility, and fall risk reduced.

---

### Q . **How common are falls and balance problems in older persons?**

A . Each year, falls occur in over a third of persons over age 65, and in over half of persons over age 75. About a third of the older population reports some difficulty with balance or ambulation, and this percentage also increases in frequency and severity after age 75.

### Q . **What are the major causes of falls?**

A . The most common causes of falls include environmental hazards (such as slippery floors and loose rugs), weak muscles, unstable balance, dizziness, vision problems, and side effects from medications (such as dizziness and confusion).

### Q . **How can I tell if I am at risk for falling?**

A . The most important predictors of fall risk include: muscle weakness (difficulty rising from a sitting position without use of hands to push off); unsteady balance (needing to walk slowly or with a wide base of support to maintain balance); having fallen in the past year; and taking certain medications (some blood pressure medications as well as psychoactive medications, such as sedatives or anti-depressants).

### Q . **What can I do to decrease my chances of falling?**

A . Ask your physician to evaluate your strength, balance, gait, entire medication list, and overall risk for falls. The chances are good that there will be a number of things that can be done to reduce fall risk, such as adjusting medications, obtaining physical therapy, starting an exercise regimen, or receiving an assistive device such as a cane or walker, to make walking safer.

### Q . **What can be done to improve balance?**

A . Similarly, there are a number of exercises and assistive devices that can improve stability. Ask your physician what would be best for you.



**Q . I sometimes get dizzy when I stand up. What causes this?**

**A .** This problem is called orthostatic dizziness and is often caused by a drop in blood pressure upon standing (orthostatic hypotension). Orthostatic hypotension can be caused by a number of conditions, including diabetes, Parkinson's disease, heart failure, drop in blood volume, dehydration, infection, and a number of medications (such as diuretics and blood pressure medicines). A less common cause of orthostatic dizziness not associated with falling blood pressure is caused by abnormalities in the inner-ear vestibular (balance) system, or its connection to the brain.

**Q . How can I make my home environment safer?**

**A .** There are many pamphlets available to assist in hazard-proofing your home environment. Alternatively, a home health provider, such as a visiting nurse or occupational therapist, can come to the home and provide a hands-on inspection and set of recommendations. Common recommendations include installing bathroom grab bars, improving lighting in key areas, removing hazardous conditions on the floor, and making stairways and entrance areas safer.

**Q . How can I find out if any of the medications I take may increase my risk of falling?**

**A .** Your physician is the best person to systematically assess the risks and benefits associated with medications and should be asked to do so. Be sure to tell your physician about all medications you are taking, even products such as over-the-counter sleeping medications and cold tablets and those medicines prescribed by other providers

**Q . What kinds of walking aids are available and whom should I talk to about getting the right one?**

**A .** A whole spectrum of walking aids are widely available, ranging from simple canes to fancy types of walkers and wheelchairs. Any walking aid should be carefully matched to your particular needs. It must be measured to the right size and provide the optimal level of stability without creating too much dependency. This is best done by an experienced provider, such as a physical therapist, physician, or prosthesis specialist. When used properly, these aids can dramatically improve mobility and safety.

**Q . Where can I go for more information?**

A variety of services can provide you with guidance on balance and dizziness. Among them are:

- Vestibular Disorders Association: (503) 229-7705; website: [www.vestibular.org](http://www.vestibular.org)
- National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders: (301) 496-7243; E-mail: [nidcd@erie.com](mailto:nidcd@erie.com)
- American Academy of Otolaryngology/Head and Neck Surgery, Inc.: (703) 836-4444; TTY (703) 519-1585.
- To locate local support resources including home health providers, call Eldercare Locator at (800) 677-1116.

