

## How to Prevent Falls

People who are ill, injured, frail or elderly are vulnerable to falls. As someone with cancer, you may have an increased risk of falling. The risk factors listed below can increase the chance for falls:

- Balance problems
- General weakness and minimal physical activity
- Changes in vision and hearing
- Loss of feeling in the feet
- Changes in thought process
- Reactions to medications
- Environmental hazards in and outside of the home

If you have already fallen, have noticed a tendency to trip or lose your balance, or have difficulty getting up from a chair or the toilet, you may benefit from a referral to the Rehabilitation Services Department for an evaluation. Physical and occupational therapists can design an individualized program to help you solve problems and increase your mobility. Below are safety tips for preventing falls.

### General Safety

- Always ask for assistance if you need help.
- Report changes in your ability to see or hear to your doctor and mention that you are concerned about falls.
- Certain medicines, cancer treatment and side effects will affect your ability to make decisions regarding your safety. Check your medicines for warnings and discuss these with your pharmacist.
- Make sure that your walking pathway is clear of obstacles.
- Wear properly fitted non-skid shoes. Avoid slippers with open toes, which tend to get caught on the floor and cause falls.
- To help maintain strength and to limit your time in bed, exercise (or increase your activity level) daily for 15 to 20 minutes.
- Avoid walking on slippery or wet floors.
- Watch out for small children and animals, which tend to get under foot.
- Use a wheeled cart to move objects from place to place. Avoid carrying heavy objects that will cause you to lose your balance.
- Do not put more weight on your affected foot or leg than allowed by your doctor or physical therapist. Contact your doctor if you have any signs of weakness or loss of sensation in your foot or leg.

- If needed, use a properly adjusted assistive device, like a cane, walker or crutches to increase safety.

When getting up from a sitting position:

- Slide forward to the edge of the chair or bed; position one foot in front of the other. Lean forward with your upper body, push down with your arms and legs, and then come to a standing position. Take a few seconds to get your balance before taking steps.
- When attempting to stand, make sure that your chair is stable. When rising from a wheelchair, make sure that the brakes are securely locked and the foot plates are in the up position.
- Sit in chairs with arms to have something to push off from. It is easier to rise from a chair with arms.
- If your chair is low, place a firm pillow in the seat to allow your hips to be at the same level or higher than your knees. This will make standing easier.

## Home Safety

- Keep all floor space clear of clutter, such as magazines and newspapers.
- Secure electrical and telephone cords with tape to avoid tripping over them.
- Avoid using throw rugs.
- Place seating in strategic areas in case you feel tired and need to sit down. Avoid sitting on unlocked wheeled chairs.
- Place all frequently used items within easy reach at countertop height. Avoid leaning over or reaching for items in cabinets above or below countertop height.
- Use a sturdy step when reaching for cabinets above your head or use an extended hand-held reacher. Ask the Rehabilitation Services Department staff about other assistive devices that are designed to help you reach and grab for items.
- Avoid using floor cleaning products that will cause a slippery surface and splashing or spilling liquids or grease onto the floor.
- Place outdoor lighting along pathways and at door entrances and use night-lights to light hallways and dark rooms.
- In the bathroom:
  - To steady yourself, install grab bars within bath or shower areas and around the toilet.
  - Use non-slip bath mats to avoid slipping in the shower and use a tub or shower bench while bathing to avoid falling.
  - Install a hand-held shower sprayer and use a long handle body brush to clean your legs and feet.
  - Be careful to avoid water that may have splashed onto the floor
  - Remain sitting while you towel dry. Keep your shoes close to step into so that you don't walk barefoot.

## Equipment Safety

- Check the rubber tips on walkers and canes for cracks and wear, and replace them when they are missing, nearly flat or cracked.

- Check rubber tips for lint, or wax or pebbles that are lodged in the tread. Clean tips regularly to prevent slippage.
- If your walker has wheels, check them regularly to ensure they are in good working condition.
- Check your folding walker to make sure that the locks “click” when it is opened.
- Before sitting in or getting up from a wheelchair, make sure that the brakes are securely locked.

## **Environmental Safety**

- When you have limited hearing, take a few minutes to observe your surroundings by taking note of people and moving objects.
- Especially when walking on uneven or unfamiliar areas, look at your feet periodically to determine proper foot placement.
- Use available ramps instead of steps and use railings when climbing steps.
- Apply color tape or paint to objects so that they stand out from the background. Also apply color tape or paint to help identify areas that have surface level changes, such as steps or a staircase.
- Be careful of curbs and cement barriers in parking lots.
- Avoid riding on escalators or moving sidewalks; if unavoidable, step carefully.
- When using elevators, be careful because some doors close quickly.
- Use caution and ask others for assistance when you must walk on areas that are wet or covered with ice or snow.

## **Recovering After a Fall**

- Position yourself on all fours and crawl to a stationary object and pull yourself up to standing. Steady yourself once standing, and then look for the nearest object to sit down on.
- If you feel you are injured, call for medical assistance.
- Some people install medical alert systems to feel more secure in their homes, especially if they live alone; others carry their cell phones with them in case they are unable to reach a telephone after falling.



- Inform your doctor or nurse that you have fallen, so they may investigate the possible cause for your fall and take action to prevent future falls.

If you have questions about how to prevent falls or would like more information, please call the Baptist Rehabilitation Center at 904.202.4200.