

# Fit and Fall Prevention

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Are you afraid of falling? Have you fallen in the past and find yourself not willing to participate in activities you enjoy. If so, you are not alone. One in three people age 65 or older fall each year making falls, the leading cause of non-fatal injuries and injury related death ([www.cdc.gov/mmwr](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr)). Additionally, falls are the leading cause of hip fracture, and half of those who receive a hip fracture during a fall never regain previous functional capacity. Injuries received in just one fall can seriously alter one's quality of life and increase the need for long term care, and further, according to the authors of the California Blueprint for Fall Prevention, one fall tends to create anxiety and fear which leads to self-imposed activity restrictions resulting in further functional decline and social isolation.

While falling is associated with aging, falls are NOT a natural part of the aging process. There are risk factors associated with age related falls and, as the number of risk factors increase, so does the possibility a fall will occur. Risk factors include:

- Physical inactivity and lifestyle,
- Hazards in the home,
- Poor posture
- Health problems
- Medications
- Vision

The good news is that falls can be prevented! While interventions in multiple risk areas may be necessary for the greatest benefit, research increasingly indicates that “physical activity offers one of the greatest opportunities to extend years of active independent life, reduce disability, and improve the quality of life for older persons” (The Active Aging Toolkit, p. 6). Further, according to the toolkit, older people who participate in regular physical activity can reduce their risk of developing chronic diseases and may realize benefits in the management of their chronic diseases (Toolkit p. 4).

Any kind of physical activity incorporated into daily living is beneficial, but the kinds of activities most often recommended to prevent falling include endurance, strength, balance and flexibility (toolkit, p. 15, EXERCISE: A Guide, p.9). Endurance activities are rhythmic, use large muscle groups, raise the heart rate and increase breathing. Endurance activities can include walking, cycling, dancing, swimming, or mowing. Endurance activities will improve stamina for daily activities like house work, grocery shopping, playing with grandchildren, or outings with friends and family, (EXERCISE: A Guide, p. 9, Toolkit, p. 16).

Strength activities do more than build muscle. Resistance activities using large muscle groups helps increases metabolism, helping to keep weight and blood glucose levels in check. More

muscle also improves functional ability for getting out a chair or opening a jar, (EXERCISE: A Guide, P. 9, Toolkit, p.18). Strength activities are usually done with stretch bands or weights, but can be done using water bottles, soup cans. Strength activities could include biceps curls, triceps curls, and chest presses, for the upper body; and for the lower body, with a band wrapped around the ankle try a side leg lift, a knee lift, or a hamstring curl.

Balance activities help reduce falls and fear of falling by improving postural stability and strengthening large leg muscles and ankles. Balance activities also help improve walking ability (EXERCISE: A Guide, p. 9, Toolkit, P. 19). Balance exercises would include lunges while holding onto the wall or a chair, standing on the toes then heels, moving the ankles side to side.

Flexibility or stretching activities keep the body limber and improve range of motion by lengthening by the muscle and body tissues. Flexible muscles make most activities of daily living such as dressing, getting in and out of a car, and picking up or reaching for objects easier, (EXERCISE: A Guide, P. 9, Toolkit, p, 17). Flexibility exercises could include turning the head to the right and holding for about 10 seconds then turning to the left. Tipping the head to the right moving the ear toward the shoulder and holding for about 10 seconds, then tip to the left. Wrist or ankle circles one direction then the other direction.

Before making any changes, or starting an exercise program, it is a good idea to consult your physician about your falling concerns, especially if you have previously fallen. Your physician may have specific program recommendations for you to follow, or may want to refer you to a physical therapist. Your physician will also want to rule out any underlying causes for a fall such as an undiagnosed condition, or changes in an existing condition. If you experience dizziness after sitting or lying down, have your provider check your blood pressure while sitting and while standing. Also, have your provider check for walking and balance ability and check your feet for sensation and neuropathy.

Fit & Fall Proof is an exercise program which focuses on preventing falls and emphasizes balance, strength, flexibility, and endurance activities. The Fit & Fall Proof program is offered statewide and is available in many communities in Southeastern Idaho including Pocatello, Blackfoot, Preston, and Soda Springs. The program is also available in Pocatello on Community Access TV Monday through Friday at 10:00. Fit & Fall Proof classes are taught by trained, peer volunteers, and anyone who is interested, can take the class leader training and start a class. For more information about Fit & Fall Proof, and learn how to start a Fit & Fall Proof class, contact Cherie Nelson at the Southeastern District Health Department at 478-6315.