



WESTERN NEUROPATHY ASSOCIATION

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Preventing Falls Barbara Moore, Occupational Therapist www.mooretherapy.com, WNA Member

Numbness and pain put the neuropathy population at high risk for falls. As a neuropathy sufferer as well as an occupational therapist, I have some specific practices to recommend to help prevent falls. These are recommendations for everyday life. There are many exercises for strengthening the body, especially the lower body as well as any activity like Tai Chi which emphasizes crossing the midline of the body. What I believe is as important as physical activities is the awareness that is required every day inside and outside of our homes to focus on our daily activities which contribute to falls. We need to mentally engage our physical activities and be on high alert for obstacles. It requires full concentration, but it will lead to good habits as you navigate your daily life with all of its obstacles, uneven surfaces, distractions, weather, lighting, and varying health conditions.

Home If you have grab bars, non-slip surfaces, handrails on both sides of stairways, good lighting day and night, there are still distractions; the phone, the door, weather. The bathroom and kitchen are the most hazardous place for falls as surfaces are hard and can be slippery when wet. In the shower, install two grab bars and a bench if there is room. If you are unstable in any way always have someone supervise. A shower chair and handheld shower head can also be helpful. Lay out clothes ahead of time and sit down to get undressed and dressed. Wear shoes that are sturdy with rounded tips so you are not catching the shoe which can cause a trip and possible fall. When walking up and down stairs, be careful when carrying something. Garage stairs should also have railings on both sides. ALWAYS hold on to railings whether you think you need to or not and if you start to fall, LET GO of what you are holding and grab the railing. Stairs are also a dangerous place.

Outdoors Hard surfaces such as concrete and asphalt are hazardous. Sidewalks are often uneven. ALWAYS try to step over the cracks and look ahead at all times. Park in the same space if you go anywhere on a regular basis. This will make walking from the car familiar BUT it still requires your vigilance to observe your environment. Grass can be dangerous with holes, etc. and it is not recommended if there is another path to walk. Thresholds of door openings can be dangerous as they are often uneven.

Exercise The most important part of your body as it relates to risk of falls is your core/lower body. The best lower body exercises incorporate squats and lunges. Can you get up from a seated position without holding on and can you shift your weight easily while standing without holding on? Can you get up from the floor without holding on? Standing on one foot is primarily a measure of balance but doing it as an exercise usually doesn't improve balance, because most impaired and older people can't do it without holding on and it can lead to a fall. In your daily life holding on is the best way to be safe. While outdoors, if you don't yet need a device like a cane, a walking stick (hiking type) is very helpful and will improve your balance and safety. In other countries many seniors use a walking stick.

Expecting your environment to change will make your daily experiences safer. Your own physical condition can change as well. Practice vigilance and make safety number one in your life. As you engage your environment rather than just pass through it, you won't guarantee no falls, but you will reduce your chances of being surprised by something you did not notice. Use devices like a cane or a walking stick if needed. And avoid unfamiliar surfaces at night when lighting is not adequate.

In closing, be proactive. Wear a medical alert device. BUT IF YOU FALL, CALL 911. Don't try to get up. You could cause a fracture or a bleed. This is not the time to save face. Let the professionals get you to the Emergency Room for examination and treatment.