

## Reducing Risk of Falls for People Living with Dementia

### THE FACTS:

- People with dementia are 4-5x more likely to fall than those without cognitive impairment.
- Falls often result in severe injuries, including fractures, which are three times more common compared to cognitively well individuals.
- Falls increase the likelihood of hospitalization or long-term care by 5x compared to non-falling older adults with dementia.
- Those with Parkinson's disease, vascular dementia, Lewy body dementia, corticobasal syndrome and progressive supranuclear palsy are especially prone to mobility problems.



**Older adults often develop the fear of falling. This can also be detrimental, causing reduced activity and muscle weakness, further increasing fall risk.**

**Both falls and the fear of falling can significantly impact independence and quality of life, leading to decreased mobility, diminished confidence, social isolation, and mental health issues such as depression and anxiety.**

### The person with dementia may experience changes that increase their risk of falling:

- Insight and judgment
- Changes in sensory perception (sight, sound, touch)
- Communication (ability to understand and express needs)
- Coordination, balance, rigidity, muscle stiffness
- Interpretation of their environment (depth, light intensity, colour, pattern, temperature)
- Short-term memory loss
- Changes in motivation and initiation of tasks (leading to sedentary lifestyle)



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**Here are 7 fall prevention strategies that can be used to reduce fall risk and enhance independence in people living with dementia.**

1. Regular medication reviews and treatment of medical conditions
2. Effective communication between the person and their caregiver
3. Healthy lifestyle — exercise and nutrition
4. Use adaptive and mobility aids and keep them nearby
5. Appropriate footwear
6. Modifications to home environment
7. Consider purchasing a fall alert device

### 1 Regular Medication Reviews and Treatment of Medical Conditions



Certain medications, especially psychotropic drugs for sleep, anxiety, and depression, as well as antihypertensives, neuroleptics, antipsychotics, sedatives, hypnotics, NSAIDs, and benzodiazepines, can increase fall risk. Polypharmacy, or taking four or more medications, further raises this risk.

Several medical conditions increase the risk of falls, including vascular diseases, arthritis, thyroid dysfunction, diabetes, depression, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. Vision problems such as glaucoma and cataracts also contribute to this risk. Additionally, orthostatic hypotension—a sudden drop in blood pressure when standing—can cause dizziness and increase fall risk. To mitigate this, encourage the person with dementia to sit up in bed before standing.

Individuals with dementia should have an annual medication review and regular medical check-ups to identify potential drug interactions or side effects, manage conditions and reduce fall risk.



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### 2 Communication

**How the caregiver communicates with the person they are assisting is an important factor in reducing the risk of falls for people with dementia. Remember to:**



- Get the person's attention: reduce distractions, gain eye contact
- Watch for non-verbal cues from the person to help understand their actions and reactions
- Be mindful of your approach: remain calm and watch your facial expression and gestures; approach from the front due to possible limited peripheral vision to avoid startling the person
- Give thought to how instructions are given: use short, simple sentences; suggest one step at a time; use cues; allow time
- Encourage and remind the person about using assistive devices, avoiding risky behaviors, and asking for help

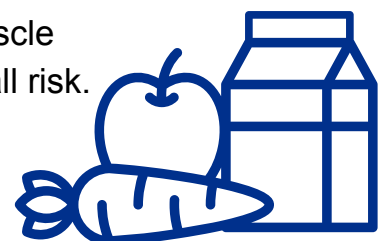
### 3 Healthy Lifestyle



Proper nutrition and exercise can also be considered fall prevention strategies. Sedentary individuals fall more than those who are relatively active, thus it is important to integrate exercise into the person living with dementia's lifestyle that focuses on balance, lower body strength and regular walking. Consult your physician or physiotherapist before starting a new exercise program.

Tai chi, with its slow, rhythmic movements and focus on balance and coordination, has been shown to be an effective exercise for people with dementia to reduce falls

Nutrient deficiencies, especially in vitamin D, can lead to muscle weakness, osteoporosis, and impaired walking, increasing fall risk. Alcohol and substances can impair balance and interact with medications, so consult your doctor or pharmacist about potential interactions.



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### 4 Use Adaptive and Mobility Aids and Keep them Nearby



Use prescribed mobility aids like canes and walkers correctly. If the person's walking ability changes, consult a doctor or occupational therapist for advice on more suitable devices. Also, ensure that mobility aids are easily accessible when getting out of bed, chairs, or off the toilet. Remind the person living with dementia to use their prescribed aids such as hearing aids and glasses and keep them in easy-to-reach and consistent places.

### 5 Appropriate Footwear



Choose safe footwear with good tread to prevent slips and falls. Opt for shoes with velcro fastenings, as they are easy to put on and take off. Avoid walking indoors in socks or slippers. Regularly check the fit and inspect the soles for wear, and avoid shoes with excessively thick soles. Additionally, ensure that outdoor footwear is suitable for the weather conditions.

### 6 Adapting the Environment to Reduce Risk



- Ensure that there is good lighting. Make sure that each room has enough light, and reduce dark areas and shadows.
- Use contrasting colors to clearly distinguish objects from their background, and opt for solid colors without patterns to reduce confusion. Avoid black surfaces, as they might be perceived as black holes.
- Clear walking paths inside the home by removing tripping hazards such as a loose rug or electrical cords.



- Reduce clutter inside and outside the home. Keep surfaces level, dry, and non-slip and ensure that there are no dips or uneven ground on walkways outside the home.
- Place night lights throughout the home for when the person needs to go to the bathroom or kitchen during the night.

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- Increase bathroom safety by using non-slippery bath mats and non-slip strips in the bath/shower. Avoid using a dark coloured bath mat, as it could be mistaken for a hole. Remove soap build-up in the tub or shower on a regular basis to avoid slipping. Ask your occupational therapist about other equipment such as a raised toilet seat, bath chair or bench.
- Install railings inside and outside the house, as well as grab bars in the bathroom for extra support.
- Keep important items in consistent, visible, and easy-to-reach places.



### 7 Consider Purchasing a Fall Detection Device



Consider investing in a personal device with fall detection that will alert medical responders or family members if the person with dementia were to fall. Models vary in features, including GPS for locating individuals who may get lost and water-resistant designs for use in the bath or shower. Explore different options to find the one that best meets your needs.

#### Did you know?

**The Alzheimer Society of PEI has a resource on different GPS and fall alert products available on the market. Ask an ASPEI staff for more information!**



**When a fall does occur, consider what might have caused or contributed to the fall:**

- Is there a reversible cause or is it related to another medical condition?
- Is the person taking multiple medications or not taking their medication as prescribed? Is the person experiencing medication side-effects or interactions?
- Does the person have changes in vision?
- Has the person's mobility changed?
- Is the person restless, fatigued or in pain but not able to communicate it?

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### More Environmental Modification Ideas to Prevent Falls:

#### Ensure Sufficient Lighting and Provide Visual Contrast:



- Purchase glow-in-the dark light switches.
- Install outdoor motion-sensor light.
- Apply contrasting coloured tape on the edge of the tub.
- Apply bright, non-slip tape on the edge of each step or on the bottom and the top stair.

#### How to Keep Pathways Clear:

##### Floors:

- Remove scatter mats or secure mats with double sided tape.
- Replace uneven, damaged flooring.
- Replace rippled carpets.
- Avoid waxing floors.
- Ensure door sills are no more than one inch high.
- Clean up spills immediately.



##### Outdoors:

- Keep pathways and the driveway level, in good repair, free of clutter and clear of ice and snow.
- Paint step edges a contrasting colour.

##### Furniture:

- Remove light, unstable or low pieces of furniture.
- Keep furnishings in consistent places.
- Use simple furniture arrangement.

#### Enhance Accessibility to Spaces and Objects:

- Label cupboards with the contents and place frequently used kitchen items within easy reach.
- Relocate the bedroom to the main floor near a bathroom.
- Have an emergency plan and place emergency numbers by the phone.
- Keep a cell phone handy at all times.
- Consider a firm mattress, lowering the bed height and adding a bed rail.



Reducing the noise level and avoid sudden, loud noises that could startle the person and potentially cause an accident.