**Are You Afraid to Fall**

**I’m very anxious about falling. What can I do?**

People over the age of 85 are the fastest growing demographic group in the United States. And by 2050, two billion adults older than 65 will be living on this planet.

Among the many concerns of older adults is an excessive fear of falling, which is a serious condition that can lead to inactivity, disability—and falls.

**Fear and Avoidance**

Older adults fear falling more than robbery, financial stress, or health problems. About 10 percent report excessive fear, and at least 3 percent of community-dwelling older adults avoid leaving their homes or yards.

Most people who fear falling avoid some physical activities. This fear is a better predictor of decreased physical activity than age, perceived health, number of prescription medications, gender, or history of falls.

Fear of falling and less physical activity led to disability, including decreased capacity to perform daily living activities such as bathing and shopping. Fearful individuals often slow their gait, widen their stance, and make other adjustments that badly affect their balance. They may experience other measures of physical decline as well.

Paradoxically, the fear of falling increases the risk of falls. It also increases the risk of having to enter a health care facility and the loss of independence. Those who had excessive fear but no falls over a two-year period increased their risk of entering a nursing home five-fold relative to those with low fear. Older adults in one scientific study, 56 percent with high levels of fear fell again within the following year, while only 37 percent of those without fear did.

**Improving Your Quality of Life**

Although appropriate caution is healthy, avoiding too many activities puts you at risk. If you have a fear of falling or want to help a friend or loved one, try the strategies below. But don’t be too protective. You could end up reinforcing the fear and making things worse in the long run.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has helpful information about reducing the risk of falling, including ways to make a home safer (getting rid of floor rugs, improving lighting, installing grab bars, etc.).

Some local agencies can help install and even pay for home modifications; call your local Area Agency on Aging or county senior services department to find referrals.

Have a doctor or pharmacist review a list of your medications to make sure they don’t increase the risk of falling; include all over-the-counter medications, including sleeping pills.

Ask a doctor for a referral to a physical therapist who can evaluate and recommend activities and ways to do them safely. Use a cane or walker if they are recommended.

With approval from a health care professional, start an exercise plan that emphasizes strength, balance, and mobility. Tai chi is particularly effective for people with concerns about falling. People who are not willing or able to leave their homes may wish to investigate classes on a local cable channel or purchase a commercial video.

Instead of avoiding activities that make you nervous, start small and take it slow. For example, visit the mall for a brief but manageable amount of time—around 15 minutes—when it isn't crowded. Use a cane or walker if your health care provider recommends it. Work up to longer periods, and rest as needed.

To improve your health and quality of life, ask your health care providers what else you can do and how to do it safely.

SOURCE: Anxiety and Depression Association of America

<https://adaa.org/living-with-anxiety/older-adults/fear-of-falling>

**Overcoming the fear of falling**

Fear can be a helpful signal; it can bring your attention to problems—such as a balance disorder, reduced vision, or muscle weakness—that keep you from moving confidently. But fear can also undermine you. Persistent worrying about a fall, if it's unwarranted, may cause you to limit your range of motion unnecessarily and avoid activities that you're capable of. It's estimated that one-third to one-half of older adults are concerned enough about potential falls that they have begun to restrict or avoid activities that would be beneficial for their health.

How can you build your confidence? If you don't trust yourself when walking, it's important to talk with your doctor to understand the cause of the fear. Is it a sign of a health problem — perhaps a vision problem or arthritis pain — that you need to address? Do you need a hip replacement or a new pair of glasses? Or are you worried about your sense of balance?

Exercise is essential for helping to maintain strength in your legs, buttocks, and core, all of which are important for balance. Certain types of exercise, such as Pilates, yoga, and tai chi are particularly helpful for balance. Measures like these can help build your confidence—and prevent devastating falls.

Protect yourself from the damage of chronic inflammation.

Science has proven that chronic, low-grade inflammation can turn into a silent killer that contributes to cardiovascular disease, cancer, type 2 diabetes and other conditions. Get simple tips to fight inflammation and stay healthy -- from Harvard Medical School experts.

If you've already had a fall, think about building confidence back gradually as you recover. Depending on how badly you've been injured, you may need to work with a physical therapist to regain your strength and range of motion.

One type of therapy you can do with a physical therapist is called gait training. In this therapy, you work not just on strengthening muscles, but also improving posture and developing good walking form, so that you move more fluidly. Once people recover 90% of their normal strength, they start to regain their confidence.

If you've been prescribed a cane or walker, don't hesitate to rely on it for balance and support. If strong relatives can accompany you on walks, so much the better. Stick to walking in familiar places that you know well, and avoid walking at night or in wet or icy conditions. If you're afraid of falling, try exercises that don't carry a risk of falling, like riding an exercise bike, swimming, or doing pool aerobics, so the water supports you.

SOURCE: Harvard Medical School

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/overcoming-the-fear-of-falling>