

## Preventing Slips, Trips, and Falls: Staying Safe in the Community

Whether you are moving about the neighborhood to stay active or just going to the store, falls can happen outdoors. In public places there are many situations that can make it difficult to maintain stability and could cause slips, trips, and falls:

- wet spots
- ice and snow
- polished floors
- uneven walking surfaces, like cracks in sidewalks
- loose, irregular surfaces such as gravel.



A **"slip"** occurs when there isn't a good grip between you're an object and the ground or surface. This causes you to lose traction, and often results in falling backward.

A **"trip"** occurs when your foot contacts an object in their way or drops to a lower level unexpectedly, causing you to be thrown off balance. A trip most often results in falling forward.

A **"fall"** occurs when you are too far off balance.

Most slip, trip, and fall incidents can be prevented by taking general precautions and safety measures. The best way to prevent injuries such as these is to be aware of where you are going and to pay attention to the ground.

### Factors that Contribute to Slips, Trips, and Falls

#### Wet or Slippery Surfaces

Wet or slippery surfaces are a major cause of slips. Floors made of highly polished marble or tile can be very slippery. When these surfaces are wet, they may become dangerous. Look carefully at floor surfaces in public buildings.

Here are some simple tips to reduce the likelihood of a slip or fall on wet or slippery surfaces:

- Wear flat or low-heeled shoes with rubber soles for more solid footing (traction.) Avoid leather soles.
- When moving on slippery surfaces, alter your stride to take slower, smaller steps. Point your feet slightly outward, keeping your center of balance under you.
- Use your feet as probes to detect possible slip, trip, and fall hazards.
- Get your feet underneath your body quickly to maintain your balance after an initial step.
- Use rails or other stable objects that you can hold onto.
- Be extra careful during and after stormy weather.
- When slippery floors have rubber or carpet runners in place, stay on them whenever possible.
- Add a rubber cap or foot to canes and replace any glider balls (tennis balls) added to walkers.

## **Ice & Snow**

Many cold-weather injuries are the result of falls on ice-covered streets and sidewalks. Getting around in snow and icy conditions calls for planning, caution, and common sense.

- Dress warmly and wear boots with non-skid soles (avoid plastic and leather soles)
- Keep warm, but make sure you can hear what's going on around you. If you're wearing a scarf or hat, make sure it doesn't block your vision or make it hard for you to hear traffic.
- A heavy backpack or other load can challenge your sense of balance. Avoid carrying too much and leave your hands and arms free to better balance yourself.
- Move slowly and take smaller steps to maintain your balance. (See tips under Wet or Slippery Surfaces)

- When entering a building, remove as much snow and water from your boots as possible. Take notice that floors and stairs may be wet and slippery. Move carefully.
- Use special care when entering and exiting vehicles—use the vehicle for support.
- Consider attaching a cane ice tip or a rubber foot.
- Replace any glider balls (tennis balls) added to walkers with a more secure rubber cap.

## **Variations in Lighting**

Bright sunny days can create a glare that makes it difficult to see. Be sure to wear the correct eyewear while walking. Bifocals or reading glasses make it harder to see hazards on the ground. During the daytime, wear sunglasses to help reduce glare.

Moving from light to dark areas, or vice versa, can cause temporary vision problems and it may take time for your eyes to adjust. When moving inside from the outdoors, move slowly and be sure to remove your sunglasses so you can see any hazards that may be in the way.

Poorly lit areas can make it difficult to see obstacles and notice changes in the walking surface. Move slowly where the light is dim and carefully watch your path of travel. Moving too fast increases the likelihood of misjudging a step or encountering a hazard before you notice it. In the evenings, go where there is plenty of light to help see where you are going.

## **Changes in the Ground Height**

Uneven surfaces and changes in ground height are a major source of trip accidents. Even a small change in walking surface of  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch is enough to cause a trip. Curbs, cracks in the sidewalk, ramps, and single steps pose possible tripping hazards. Stop at curbs and check the height before stepping up or down.

Additionally, variations in elevation can contribute to a “step and fall.” This can happen when you take a step and your front foot lands on a surface that is lower than you expected, such as when unexpectedly stepping off a curb in the dark.

Changes in elevation may be unavoidable. Watch for bumps, potholes, sidewalk cracks, or other obstacles that can cause you to trip or step inappropriately.

## Traveling Safely

- **On sidewalks**—Watch for cracks, holes, and changes in sidewalk levels that can come from overgrown tree roots or shifting soil. Uneven sidewalks can throw you off balance.
- **In parks and around the neighborhood**—Loose, irregular surfaces such as gravel, sandy paths, and wooden walkways can make it difficult to maintain your stability. Adjusting your stride to a pace that is suitable for the surface and the tasks you are doing. Realize that there are hazards involved in going “off road.” A shortcut across the lawn or through a flowerbed may not be the best choice.
- **Crossing streets**—Be careful at curbs that have been cut away to allow access for bikes or wheelchairs. The incline and uneven surface may lead to a fall. Take your time when crossing streets—hurrying to cross before the light changes puts you at risk of falling. Stop at islands in the middle of the street when available and wait for the next opportunity to go.
- **On stairways**—Hold handrails and move slowly when going up or down outdoor stairs. Watch for uneven or irregular steps.
- **In parking lots and garages**—Be aware of curbs, car stops, speed bumps, parking posts, ramps, and any other changes in elevation.
- **On public transportation** (buses, trains, subways, planes)—Always use handrails when available. Be especially careful in stepping over gaps between where you stand and the vehicle you are boarding. Use any buckles or straps as appropriate. Wait until the vehicle stops moving before getting up to exit.
- **In stores and other crowded places**—Obstructed aisles or walkways present tripping hazards or require frequent changes of direction, throwing you off balance. Use care when in crowds. Being jostled by others can upset your balance.