

Preventing falls

Everyone falls sometimes. When we are younger, we recover from all but the most serious falls. As we get older, our bones lose some of their strength, and even minor falls can have serious consequences.

Many of us believe that falls are an inevitable part of getting older, but this is not true. Falls often happen because of a combination of factors. If we know what these factors are, we can do something to change them. The good news is that we do know the main causes of falling.

Some risk factors:

- Unsafe footwear or problems with feet.
- Problems with balance and walking.
- Changes in eyesight that are not corrected.
- Difficulties distinguishing between similar tones and colours.
- Lack of physical activity.
- Inappropriate or wrong use of medications.
- Hazards around the home or in public places.

For example:

-if you have vision problems, you are less likely to notice a step that is the same colour as the surrounding path, especially in dim light.

or

-if you do not exercise regularly, your balance may become poor, and you are unable to recover if you trip or stumble.

The Stay on Your Feet Program

This program is an initiative of the North Coast Public

Health Unit and aims to increase public awareness of these issues. We all need to make changes to our behaviour, our lifestyle and our environment, to prevent falls successfully.

How the family doctor can help

•Eyesight

A GP can do a simple eye check. For a change of glasses, you will need to visit an optometrist. For more complicated problems, your GP will refer you to an ophthalmologist.

Difficulty distinguishing between similar colours cannot be fixed, but if you know you have this problem, you will be more careful and you can make some changes to your environment. For example, you could paint a white strip across the steps around your home.

•Physical activity

Regular and safe exercise is essential to maintaining good health. It also helps prevent falling. When starting a new exercise programme, it is a good idea to get advice from an expert about the best activity to suit your particular health needs.

Regular walking is a good exercise. Community Health and Education Groups' (CHEGS) gentle exercise classes are particularly

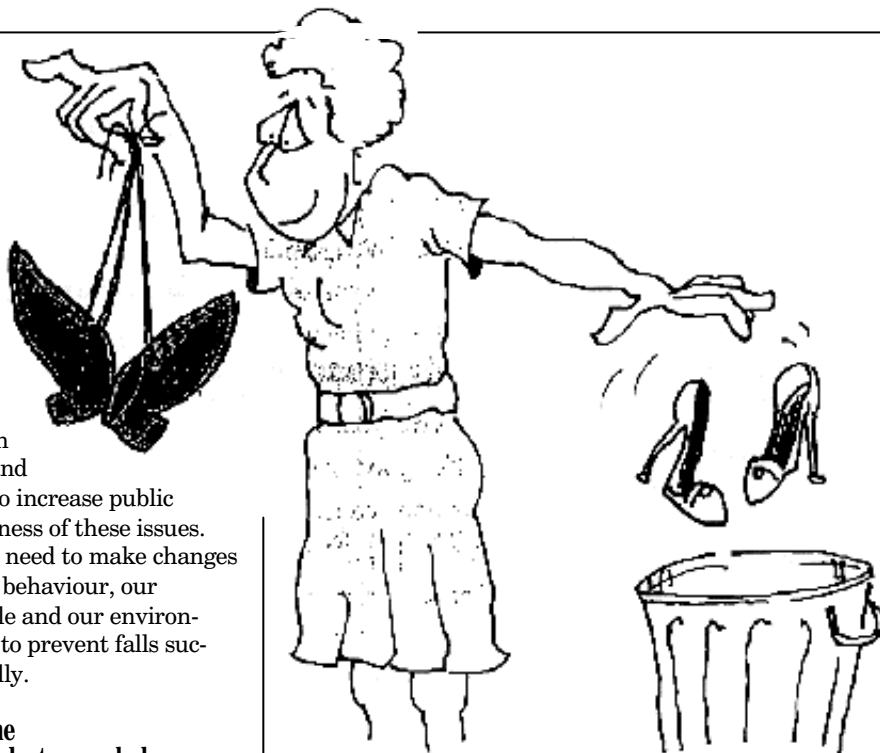


Illustration taken from "Stay on Your Feet", published by the North Coast Public Health Unit

designed to meet the needs of older people.

•Medications

Your GP should review your medications regularly. You need to tell your doctor about any concerns or side effects your tablets may be causing, especially dizziness or a faint feeling on standing up. If you get new tablets from another doctor or the chemist, make sure you can take them safely with any other medication you may be on.

•Footwear and feet

Problems with shoes can cause problems with feet. Likewise, problems with feet can cause problems with shoes. Both can increase the risk of falling. Discuss any problems with your doctor to ensure there are no underlying medical problems. This is particularly important for people with diabetes.

Hazards in your environment

For example, crumbly steps and paving, poorly lit areas and curled up mats. If we are aware of these problems, we can take steps to fix or avoid them. It can be something as simple as making sure there is always enough light on the way to the bathroom at night.

With simple changes to our lifestyle and surroundings, we can take those first steps towards preventing a fall.

Information about safety and non-slip products can be found in the booklet Stay on Your Feet. For your free copy, telephone the North Coast Public Health Unit on 217 231.

This article was prepared with the help of the North Coast Public Health Unit.