

# Minimize your risk of falls

When a winter storm struck the Greater Cincinnati-Northern Kentucky area one winter afternoon, leaving a glaze of ice on sidewalks, driveways, and streets, the falls began immediately.

“In one day I treated more than 10 people who suffered back and head injuries after falling,” said Dr. Tann Nichols, a neurosurgeon with the Mayfield Clinic.

Most of Dr. Nichols’s patients were 50 to 60 years of age, but a few were in their 30s. “Older adults were smart enough to stay inside,” Dr. Nichols observed, “but the rest of us were just marching along. People were thinking, ‘Oh, I need to be careful,’ and down they went.”

## To help prevent falls:

### *Dr. Nichols shares the following tips for preventing falls:*

- **Take reasonable precautions.** Hold onto handrails whenever on the stairs, and never store items on stairs. Remove throw rugs or secure them to the floor with double-sided sticky rug mats, available at hardware and carpet stores.
- **Maintain your overall health.** Have your vision checked and your medications reviewed at recommended intervals. Engage in a regular exercise program that is approved by your doctor.
- **Be alert for ice.** Snow you see, ice you don’t. The ice is what makes you fall. Step carefully. If you don’t have to be out in bad weather, don’t be. If you don’t have to go shopping that day, let it wait. If you must be out, wear skid-resistant boots.
- **Be aware of your limitations.** As we age, our reflexes slow down and our balance is not as good as it used to be. Hire someone to do heavy outdoor chores.
- **Always use proper equipment and tools.** Boxes were not designed to serve as footstools. Chairs are not ladders. Use a ladder of proper height and stability. Don’t stand on chairs to change lightbulbs.

The spate of injuries was a stark reminder that a fall -- one of the most preventable causes of injury, disability, and even death -- is a risk that should be taken seriously by people of all ages. Consider:

- Falls are the leading cause of unintentional, injury-related death among people 65 and over and the third leading cause of unintentional, injury-related death for all ages, claiming the lives of more than 18,000 people each year, according to the National Safety Council.
- Of the 1.4 million cases of traumatic brain injury suffered in the United States each year, 28 percent (or 392,000 cases) are the result of falls, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).
- Every 18 seconds, the CDC reports, an older adult is treated in an emergency department after a fall. Over the course of a year, one in three adults aged 65 and over experience a fall that requires medical attention.

“Falls are bad, especially for older individuals,” Dr. Nichols said. “It’s not just that we fall more as we get older; we’re also a lot less resistant to the effects of the falls as we age. When you’re 25 you may be a bit sore; when you’re 85 you break things.”

Depending on the time of year, Dr. Nichols sees fairly predictable patterns. “In the winter, we see slips on ice; in the spring and fall we see falls from ladders and chairs as people are trying to get their homes ready for the changes in seasons. In the summer, falls tend to be related to outdoor activities.”

People need to acknowledge their limitations, Dr. Nichols said. “In our 70s and 80s, we don’t need to be cleaning our own gutters or trimming our own trees. I had an 80-year-old patient who was trimming his trees with a chain saw. A tree branch got away from him and whacked him on the head. Eighty-year-olds probably shouldn’t be using chain saws.”

Stairs pose a less avoidable hazard. Many head injuries occur when older individuals trip and fall down stairs, especially in homes where the 10 to 12 stairs leading to a basement are not interrupted by a landing. “In most houses in Northern Kentucky, the stairs go straight down,” Dr. Nichols said. “Out west where I grew up, most stairways were broken up by landings. People would fall only four or five steps, rather than going all the way down.”