

Preventing

falls on stairs

in older people



**Summary guidance on how
pharmacists can help**

Introduction

This advice sheet has been produced to accompany the Pharmacy Healthcare Scheme (PHS) pack *Pharmacists – your role in preventing falls in older people* (April 2000) and is part of a series to help improve the health and well-being of older people who visit the pharmacy.

Falls on steps and stairs in the home are a serious problem among older people aged 65 years and above. In the UK, for example, 57,000 older people have a fall on steps and stairs in the home each year. Almost 1,000 die as a consequence. A further 22,000 older people experience serious injury, suffering a fracture, concussion or otherwise requiring admission to hospital for more than one day (DTI, 1999).

When older people fall on stairs the consequences can be both traumatic and seriously disabling. Fracture injuries are more common among fallers in this age group, and these and other injuries often take longer to heal (Pauls, 1985; Nagata, 1993; Dowswell *et al*, 1999). In addition to any physical injury, falls can also have serious psychological and social consequences, affecting confidence, mobility and general well-being.

Unfortunately falls are likely to become an increasing problem as the age profile of the population changes to include more older people.












What role can pharmacists and their staff play in helping to prevent older people falling on steps and stairs?

Older people are frequent users of the pharmacy, particularly for repeat prescribing of medicines. The recent strategy *Pharmacy in the future – implementing the NHS plan* has highlighted and intends to strengthen the role of pharmacists in helping people make the most of their medicines and to improve their own health.

In 1999, Pharmacy Healthcare produced a pack *Pharmacists – your role in preventing falls in older people* (PHS, 2000) with the Health Education Authority and Department of Trade and Industry. (This work has now been taken over by Health Promotion England in association with the DTI). The pack emphasised the part that medicines may play in causing falls in older people and the role pharmacists can have in helping to minimise risk. This new briefing document on stair safety gives further information on other risk factors that may increase the risk of falls in the home – in particular, from the physical environment.







Factors that increase the risk of older people falling

These include:






-  some types of medication, for example, sedatives and antidepressants
-  multiple drug regimens
-  weak muscles and poor balance associated with a lack of exercise
-  physical disability and lack of mobility
-  cognitive impairment
-  environmental factors such as loose carpets, poor lighting and badly fitting shoes
-  acute and chronic disorders including stroke and heart disease
-  poor vision
-  a history of previous falls
-  depression
-  alcohol use.

Apart from the physiological effects of illness and ageing, there are environmental and behavioural factors that increase the risk of falls.

Environmental factors include (Templer, 1992):

-  no or poorly-designed handrails
-  inappropriate stair coverings (e.g. loose mats), or coverings in poor condition
-  obstructions (temporary, e.g. clothing, or permanent, e.g. furniture)
-  poor lighting
-  pets or children
-  stairs that are too steep.

Behavioural factors include (Templer, 1992; Hill *et al*, 2000):

-  hurrying up or down stairs
-  not switching lights on when using stairs at night
-  leaving objects on the stairs
-  carrying objects
-  cleaning stairs.

Pharmacists and their staff should be aware of the existence of these risk factors and their role in causing accidents on the stairs. They can then suggest the following ways in which older people can ensure using the stairs is a safer activity.

Environmental factors

Absent or poorly designed handrails

If there is no handrail, suggest advice on home adaptation is sought from local support groups or council

Handrails should fit comfortably into the grip of the hand

A second handrail will increase safety

Ensure handrails are securely fastened to the wall

Stairs that are steep

Take breaks whilst climbing

Do not hurry when going up or down stairs

Use the handrails

Inappropriate stair coverings (e.g. loose mats), or coverings in poor condition

Remove all loose fittings

Replace worn carpets, rugs or coverings

If replacing a carpet, choose a light, plain colour rather than a patterned carpet

Obstructions – whether temporary (for example, clothing) or permanent (for example, furniture)

Remove furniture items from half landings and the top and bottom of stairs

Find alternative storage points for items that need to be carried up or down the stairs

Be careful of long and trailing clothes that can cause tripping

Poor lighting

Change lampshades to plain, pale colour which lets out as much light as possible

Use the highest wattage bulbs light fitting allows. Long life bulbs will save money over time and do not need changing as often

Patterned carpets can make steps hard to see. Edging each step with heavy duty tape of a contrasting colour can help. Ensure tape remains well stuck down

Pets or children

These can obstruct stairs or change direction rapidly so watch out for pets and children.

Behavioural factors

Ways of climbing stairs – including handrail use

Use both handrails if present

Always use the handrail

Switch lights on when using stairs at night

Always use the lights at night. In Hill *et al's* survey, 18 per cent reported not switching on the stair lights when going downstairs during the night

Get up slowly at night. The risk of falls may increase at night due to postural hypotension

Carrying objects

Advise obtaining help from carers or friends with regular items such as laundry, and heavy or larger items such as furniture

Cleaning stairs

Take care when cleaning. Conventional (as opposed to hand-held) vacuum cleaners with trailing leads and hoses can cause tripping

Get help with cleaning the stairs or use a cordless vacuum cleaner or dustpan and brush to improve safety

Leaving objects on the stairs

Keep the stairs clear of clutter. Although 89 per cent of participants in Hill *et al's* study believed objects left on stairs were a predisposing risk factor for falls, objects were left on stairs in 29 per cent of the homes studied, especially on half-landings

Advise finding a safer place to leave temporary items and to move permanent furniture items which is the safest option. Leaving objects on stairs with the intention of taking them up or down at a later time appears to be common amongst older people (71 per cent in this study)

Hurrying up or down stairs

Take care on the stairs. In Hill *et al's* study, 63 per cent reported hurrying on the stairs at times. Reasons given included needing to use an upstairs toilet, answering the telephone or the door

Consider having a telephone point or intercom installed upstairs. Remember that many telephone companies have a 'last number' service free of charge to check who called

Pharmacists can also recommend the leaflet, *Step up to Safety*, which gives older people ten top tips for safety on the stairs. Free copies for you to pass on to your customers can be obtained from the DTI Publications Order line 0870 1502 500.

Summary

Older people are more at risk from falling on steps or stairs at home and unfortunately are also likely to suffer serious consequences for health and well being as a result. Pharmacists and their staff have the opportunity to talk to a significant number of older people through daily contact and should be aware of the side effects that medicines (and particularly multiple medicines taking) can have on the risk of falls for older people.

It is important to remember that using the stairs safely can be a regular (or possibly the only) form of physical activity for some people and their use *per se* should not be discouraged. The practical advice mentioned is likely to reduce the likelihood of an older person falling on the stairs.

References

Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) (1999) *Home accident surveillance system including leisure activities*.

Doswell T, Towner E, Cryer C, Jarvis S, Edwards P and Lowe P (1999) *Accidental falls: fatalities and injuries – an examination of the data sources and review of the literature on preventing strategies*. University of Newcastle upon Tyne.

Hassell K, Rogers A, Noyce P, Nicolas G (1998). *The public's use of community pharmacies as a primary health care resource*. University of Manchester.

Hill LD, Haslam RA, Howarth PA, Brooke-Wavell K, and Sloane JE (2000) *Safety of older people on stairs behavioural factors*. Loughborough University.

Nagata H (1993) Fatal and non-fatal falls – a review of earlier articles and their developments. *Safety Science*: **16**: 379–90.

Pauls J L (1985) Review of stair-safety research with an emphasis on Canadian studies. *Ergonomics* **28**: 999-1010.

Templer J (1992) *The staircase*. MIT Press Massachusetts.

© Crown copyright 2001

Pharmacy Healthcare Scheme
1 Lambeth High Street
London SE1 7JN

Tel: 020 7820 3213 (direct line)
E-mail: phs@rpsgb.org.uk

Registered charity no:1021335

Produced for the Pharmacy Healthcare Scheme
by Health Promotion England

Designed by A.R.T. Creative Partnership

Further information

Royal National Institute for the Blind – helpline

Telephone 0345 66 9999

Open Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 5.00pm

Calls are charged at a local rate
For information, support and advice for anyone with a serious sight problem.

Help the Aged – Senior Line

Freephone 0808 800 6565

A free national advice service for older people and their carers. Provides advice on welfare and disability rights, housing and community care.

Age Concern Information Line

Freephone 0800 009966

Open daily from 7.00am to 7.00pm

A free helpline for older people and their carers who want information on issues such as money, health, community care, housing, transport, heating and education.

National Co-ordinating Body for Home Improvement Agencies

Telephone 01457 891 909

Calls are charged at national rate.
For local advice and support about home adaptations.

Disabled Living Foundation

Telephone 0845 130 9177 or

Minicom 0870 603 9176

Open Monday to Friday, 10.00am to 4.00pm.

For advice and information about equipment for daily living.

Pharmacy Healthcare Scheme

Telephone 0207 820 3213

Fax 0207 582 4985

E-mail: psh@rpsgb.org.uk

1 Lambeth High Street
London SE1 7JN

Centre for Pharmacy Post Graduate Education (CPPE)

Telephone 0161 778 4040

Fax 0161 778 4030

E-mail: cppe@man.ac.uk

School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences

Coupland 111 Building
University of Manchester
Oxford Road
Manchester M13 9PL

Occupational therapy

Look in the telephone directory under 'Social services' to find the local number.
An occupational therapist can discuss home adaptations that may be helpful.



Department of Trade and Industry



Health Promotion England