Preventing Outdoor Falls

What you can do for yourself

• Many outdoor fallers are active seniors engaging in walking for exercise. Be cautious about the surface and setting in which you walk. Walk on a prescribed track at a local high school, community college, or university. Walk for exercise in newer, well-maintained areas, even malls and civic spaces.

• Walk in pairs or groups so you can alert each other of potential hazards.

• Beware of cracks in sidewalks, tree roots, holes, and changes in elevation.

• If you see a tree ahead in your path, expect and look for tree roots as hazards, as well as fallen leaves, blossoms, seed pods, and other debris.

• Walk in good lighting conditions when you think you can see the best.

• Older people with a history of falls should not wear shoes with thick, soft soles. Footwear with firm soles and low heels help reduce falls.

• Use caution when carrying something or hurrying.

• Use caution in environments and weather where snow and ice are present.

• Hold hand rails and move slowly when climbing outdoor stairs.

• Use caution in parking lots and parking garages. Note curbs and changes in elevation.

• Use caution when using public transportation, especially getting on and off buses and trains. Always use hand rails when available.

• Use caution when crossing streets at crosswalks. Cross where curb cuts/ramps are present, if possible, to prevent tripping. Stop at respite islands, when available, and wait for the next walk sign. Ask for help if you need it. Hurrying across streets puts you at risk of falling.

• Vision problems increase one’s chances of falling. Be sure you have the correct eyewear on while walking. Bifocals and reading glasses can hinder one’s ability to see hazards.
What you can do for your community

- Report cracks in sidewalks, potholes, and dangerous tree wells to your local jurisdiction.
- Hazards that are not repaired immediately can be marked temporarily with bright paint or other markers.
- Find out whom to call. Most cities have street maintenance divisions with set procedures for reporting problems.
- Report street lights that are inoperative.
- Report snow, ice, or debris on sidewalks, which require removal.
- Follow up with your city to find out the likelihood and timeframe of repairs.
- Become an advocate in your city. Team up with others. Meet with public officials such as City Council members, Redevelopment Agency staff, Planning Staff, and Public Works staff to explain to them your concerns about outdoor hazards. Meet with private developers as well.
- Advocate for contrasting color paint, handrails, and non-slip surfaces on public stairs.
- Advocate for the use of rubber sidewalks in areas with many trees. Rubber sidewalks have several benefits: they do not crack on top of tree roots; they are replaceable one square at a time; they lessen the impact of falls; and they are made out of recycled tires.
- Advocate for increased street crossing times at busy intersections. Elders who hurry are more likely to fall.
- Take repairs into your own hands, if possible. Some cities, such as Los Angeles and Chicago, now have "shared-cost-sidewalk programs" in which residents can pay a portion of the sidewalk repair cost in front of their homes. While this type of program costs residents money, it does provide a way for residents (who are willing to pay) to get their sidewalks repaired in a timely manner.