

Practical, everyday advice

# Falls

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Approximately 50 — 60% of people living with multiple sclerosis will have one or more falls in a 12-month period. Research shows, perhaps surprisingly, that the majority of falls actually occur inside the home. Falls can happen to anyone irrespective of age or medical condition, though having multiple sclerosis can increase the risk of falling.

In the majority of reported cases, falls cause no serious harm other than perhaps embarrassment

and dented pride. However, the consequences of falls can be serious, ranging from distress and loss of confidence, through to injuries, pain and loss of independence.

Falls can be prevented, and we encourage people with multiple sclerosis to assess their own falls risk and make positive changes toward protecting themselves from the potential for falls in and out of the home.

## Why do people fall?

Many falls are caused by a combination of factors, both to do with objects in the environment — such as tripping over something — and health related issues. Some of the multiple sclerosis related factors that increase the risk of falling include:

- **Visual problems** Double vision, blurred vision and nystagmus can make it difficult to focus or to see any hazards clearly. Optic neuritis can affect your balance if information from the eyes reach the brain at different speeds.
- **Mobility problems** Problems with mobility and/or balance — in particular foot drop, numbness, dizziness and fatigue may cause issues.
- **Contenance problems** Rushing to the toilet if you need to empty your bladder or bowel more frequently or urgently can make you less careful than usual and lead to falls. Urinary tract infections (UTI) can also increase the risk of falls, as multiple sclerosis symptoms can worsen with these types of infections.
- **Cognitive problems** Problems relating to concentration, attention span, poor memory or other cognitive symptoms might mean you find it more difficult to judge distances, you may trip

over things that you'd forgotten were there, or if you're trying to do more than one thing at once you're not fully concentrating on walking

- **Some medications** Side effects of medications such as drowsiness or dizziness.

You are also more likely to fall if you've had previous falls. Falls are also a concern for people with multiple sclerosis who use wheelchairs and scooters — especially if they're not used all the time. Risk factors include when transferring in or out of a chair, uneven pavements, or when someone inexperienced is pushing the chair.

# Fear of falling

If you have experienced a previous fall, you may be concerned about falling again and become less active than you used to be, or limit what you do in an attempt to avoid situations where you feel you might be more vulnerable.

Even if you haven't fallen before, the fear of falling can itself be a risk factor. Reduced activity may mean your stamina levels and fitness are reduced as your muscles become weaker if you don't use them and your joints can become stiffer. As a result, everyday activities will be more physically demanding as your body isn't as used to moving and maintaining your balance, so your risk of falling increases. There is also a risk that you might become less motivated and increasingly dependent on others.

## Ideas to reduce the fear of falling

- Talk about your concerns and share your worries with others.
  - Consider getting a personal alarm system — this might be a simple pull-cord or there are alarms that can be worn around your wrist or neck.
  - If you have one, keep your mobile with you at all times so that you can call someone for help.
  - Consider what you would do in an emergency and who you would call — having a plan in place should you fall can take away some of the fear.
- Try not to let your fear of falling make you avoid social situations — the more you get out, the more fit and active you will be, and it can also benefit your emotional wellbeing.
  - Learn and practice ways to get up if you should fall — a physiotherapist can teach you ways to do this. They can also help with exercises to help maintain or improve your mobility, posture and balance to reduce the risk of falling in the first place.

**A personal alarm can be worn around your wrist or neck.**

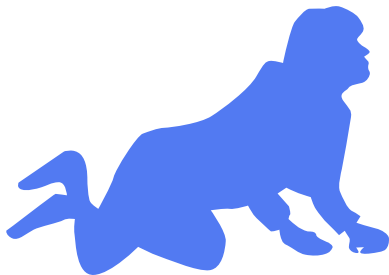


# What to do if you fall

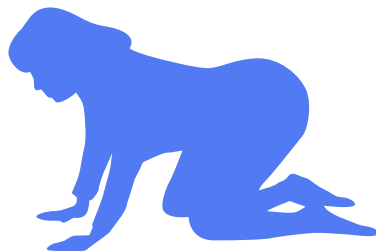
If you do fall, try not to panic. Although you may feel a little shaken and shocked, try to stay calm, gather your thoughts and remember what you need to do.

## If you don't feel hurt and you feel able to get up:

- Take your time and don't get up too quickly.



- Roll onto your hands and knees and look for something stable, such as a chair or bed.



- Holding onto the furniture, slowly get up.



- Sit down and rest for a while to recover.



## If you do feel hurt or are unable to get up:

- Try to get someone's attention, either by shouting or making a noise, or by using your personal alarm or mobile phone if you have one.
- While you are waiting for help, get as comfortable and warm as you can. For instance, try to get to a carpeted area if you can, and try to reach something warm to put over you (particularly your legs and feet) such as a doona, blanket, towels or a coat.



- Unless you suspect a fracture, try to change your position every half an hour or so. Moving regularly will keep you more comfortable and avoid pressure sores.

# Can falls be prevented?

Making changes to prevent falls is easier than you think.

Firstly, check your surroundings. Complete a home safety check list to help identify any areas inside or outside your home that might contribute to increased falls risk.

Make any necessary changes or modifications.

Keep your home well lit. Try to keep clutter around the house to a minimum. Consider placing sturdy furniture in strategic places at home so you can hold on to it if necessary. Consider an occupational therapy assessment to check on the safety of any changes you make.

Walking aids such as a stick or frame may give an added sense of security or aid balance.

Understand your symptoms and how they may increase your risk of falls and seek advice on how to manage your multiple sclerosis symptoms effectively.

Think about your clothing and footwear. Low or flat-soled shoes might help. Boots can provide you with some ankle support. Clothing that is easy to undo if you have bladder or bowel problems might mean you don't have to rush as much to get to the toilet.

Try not to rush to answer the door or a ringing phone.

Take care when bending down and stand up slowly after lying or sitting.

Be medication aware, know the side effects of any medication you are taking and discuss these risks with your GP. Have your medications reviewed regularly.

Make sure you have regular eye tests if visual problems are an issue. Simple things like giving your eyes time to adjust to sudden changes in light — for example, when going from a dark room to bright sunshine outside — can also be helpful.

If you are prone to falling, consider keeping a falls diary so you can build up a picture of why they might be happening.



**A walking stick may give an added sense of security or aid balance**

# Further advice and assistance

If you have had a fall or are concerned that you may be at risk of a fall, there are a number of services that may be able to offer some help.

- **GP** As well as assessing and treating any health issues, your GP can refer you to appropriate local services and can recommend a falls risk assessment, which will look at ways to improve safety in your home and reduce the risk of further falls. Your GP can review your medications.
- **Physiotherapist** Can suggest exercises to improve fitness, balance and posture and can also advise on walking equipment. Some services may provide training in transferring into and out of a wheelchair
- **Occupational therapist** Can help you find easier ways of doing everyday tasks such as showering, cooking or to help make things easier at work. They can also advise on and provide some equipment and adaptations to the home.

- **MS Plus Connect** Information, advice and referral. Speak to an MS nurse advisor  
**1800 042 138**  
**[www.msplus.org.au](http://www.msplus.org.au)**

- **Independent living centres Australia**  
Information about products and services to help people remain independent and improve their quality of life  
**1300 885 886**  
**<https://ilcaustralia.org.au/>**