

Safe winter walking

Winter can be a challenging time of year for older adults to stay healthy and safe. Many things can impact your safety as you walk including footwear, balance, distractions and the environment. Physical activity throughout the year is a part of healthy aging and can help prevent falls and fractures.

Here are some tips to stay healthy and safe this winter.

Stay active to keep muscles and bones strong and prevent falls during the winter months. Try joining an indoor walking club for those really cold days. Our region has many beautiful places to engage in outdoor physical activity. Walking is a wonderful way to spend time with others and improve physical fitness. Lack of physical activity is one the key factors for why older adults fall more frequently than younger people.

Consider a cane or walking poles, and use assistive devices to help support your balance. Consider carrying a baggie of sand or cat litter in your pocket. If you see ice, you can throw some down for a better grip.

Dress for winter weather and monitor the forecast to plan ahead. Dressing in layers ensures you are prepared for changing winter weather. It is important to wear a hat because body heat escapes from an uncovered head. On bright days don't forget the sunscreen and sunglasses! Make it a habit to use lotion with sunscreen every morning all year long.

Place a chair or bench by the door so you can sit down to get your shoes on rather than risk a fall balancing on one foot. Choose your footwear carefully. Wear shoes that fit well, have good arch support and with non-slip treads on the soles. To see how your footwear measures up against other boots, go to Toronto Rehab Institute's website, www.ratemytreads.com. Many boots have been tested in their lab where participants walk back and forth on ice as the researchers tilt the floor further and further until they slip.

Watch surfaces carefully when walking, and keep your hands out of your pockets for better balance. Watch for ice, cracks, and uneven or changing surfaces. Remember, black ice is often not visible to the eye. As we age our ability to adapt from dark to light is slower so take extra caution when going from a brightly lit building out into the dark and vice versa. Be very careful when going from outdoors to indoors if your footwear is wet as it is easy to slide and fall. Slow down and place your feet wider apart to give a more solid base of support when walking on wet or icy surfaces. Black ice can occur on sidewalks just like roads so be vigilant and take your time.

Keep entranceways, walkways, stairs and driveways clear of ice and snow. Keep a bag of grit, salt, sand or non-clumping cat litter by the entranceway. Sprinkle it on entranceways, walkways and stairs. Keep a shovel and broom by entranceways. Nearly one third of falls in older adults involve hazards at home. Keep your spaces free of clutter and tripping hazards and ensure that you have adequate lighting in and around your home.

After your walk, assess how you feel, if you are sore, switch to shorter walks and gradually increase your walking time. Drink water often. Dehydration can increase your risk of falling. It's especially important to stay hydrated when you're physically active.

Walking improves your mental, social, and physical health; balance, posture and muscle strength. It also reduces the risk of heart disease, developing high blood pressure, diabetes, improves bone health and reduces the risk of fractures from falls.