

OCSWA – Weather and Emergency Preparedness for Older Adults

Falls prevention in all seasons

Falls are not a normal part of aging, but as we age, we may be more susceptible to serious injury from a fall. Falls are the number one cause of injuries leading to ER visits, hospital stays and deaths in Ohioans age 65-plus. Severe weather in all seasons can increase our risk of falling. However, most falls can be prevented when you understand your risks and take active steps to remove or avoid hazards.

Winter

Ice and snow – The most obvious threat for falls during the winter may be ice and snow. To stay safe when the ground beneath you is slippery:

- Wear boots and shoes that fit properly and have soles with bumps and grooves for good traction.
- Slow down. You may want to rush to get out of the conditions, but when you do, you are more likely to lose your balance. Give yourself extra time to get where you're going.
- Make sure steps leading into your home have sturdy handrails that can support you if you slip.
- Watch for slippery surfaces ahead of you. Keep your head up and use your eyes to look down.
- Don't try to walk in more than an inch of snow. Deeper accumulations can cause you to trip.
- When in doubt, ask for help.

Other winter risks for falling:

- Reduced activity – Wintry conditions outside may cause you to remain inside, which can limit your activity. Stay active all year round by engaging in exercise that builds strength and balance.
- Tripping hazards – Things we do to keep our homes warm in winter can create tripping hazards. Keep space heaters and blankets out of walkways. If you must use throw rugs on cold floors, secure them to the floor with tape.
- Winter clothing – Coats, gloves, hats and other winter clothing are designed to keep us warm, but items that are bulky, don't fit well or could catch on objects can increase your risk of falling.
- Power outages – Ice and snow can cause the power to go out, which can limit your ability to see obstacles.

Spring

- Rain and mud – Winter's thaw and spring storms can create mud, which can be slippery and can get on a variety of surfaces. Avoid walkways that are covered with mud. Clean wet and dried mud off of your shoes to maintain the most traction.
- Storms – Spring storms can cause a variety of tripping hazards from power outages to debris in outdoor walkways.
- Flooding – Never walk or drive into flood waters! Still water can make you trip and moving water can knock you off your feet.

Summer

- Heat, dehydration and dizziness – Older adults are at higher risk for heat-related illnesses. Heat and dehydration can make you dizzy, which can lead to falls. Drink plenty of liquids and seek cool shelter during the hottest part of the day.
- Storms – Spring storms can cause a variety of tripping hazards from power outages to debris in outdoor walkways.
- Flooding – Never walk or drive into flood waters! Still water can make you trip and moving water can knock you off your feet.

Autumn

- Falling leaves – Leaves are supposed to fall; people aren't. Leaves, branches and other debris from trees due to the change in seasons can make walkways slippery or hide tripping hazards, like uneven surfaces, edges and steps. Keep walkways clean, and if you can't see that the surface is clear and flat, pick another path.
- Cleaning the gutters – Autumn is a time to prevent winter. If winterizing your home includes cleaning gutters, changing light bulbs or other tasks that require you to get up high, use the right tools for the job. Use a step ladder or a step stool with a handle, and maintain three points of contact (two feet and a hand, or two hands and a foot) at all times. Do not climb on chairs or other furniture that was not designed for that purpose.

STEADY U Ohio is a statewide initiative to prevent falls among older adults. Visit their [website \(www.steadyu.ohio.gov\)](http://www.steadyu.ohio.gov) to take a falls risk self-assessment, sign up for news and resources, interact on Facebook and Twitter and get a variety of falls-prevention tips.

Extreme heat IS severe weather

People age 65 years and older are at higher risk for heat stress than younger people because older adults:

- Do not adjust as well as younger people to sudden changes in temperature;
- Are more likely to have chronic medical conditions that upset normal body responses to heat; and
- Are more likely to take prescription medicines that impair the body's ability to regulate its temperature or that inhibit perspiration.

Other conditions that increase a person's risk include age, obesity, fever, dehydration, heart disease, mental illness, poor circulation, sunburn and prescription drug and alcohol use. Heat-related illnesses include heat cramps, heat exhaustion and heat stroke.

To avoid heat-related illness:

- Drink plenty of cool, non-alcoholic beverages.
- Wear lightweight clothing and rest frequently.
- Remain indoors in the heat of the day and avoid strenuous activity.
- Take a cool shower, bath or sponge bath.
- Seek an air-conditioned environment.

Excessive heat and older adults – Ohio Department of Aging
http://www.aging.ohio.gov/resources/publications/HWtoolkit_heat.pdf

Check on your neighbors

For a variety of reasons, older friends and relatives may have a harder time adjusting during extreme conditions than younger people do. If severe weather is forecasted or has just occurred, check in on older friends and family members to ensure that they are okay and that they have the resources they need to stay safe and healthy.

Do a risk assessment:

- Does he or she depend on oxygen?
- Does he or she need help walking?
- Does he or she need help getting to the bathroom?
- Does he or she need medical attention?

Check vital supplies:

- Does he or she have access to clean drinking water?
- Does he or she have the ability to cook and safely store food?
- Does he or she have access to healthy, non-perishable food that can be prepared without electricity?
- Does he or she have adequate means to keep the temperature in the home in a comfortable range?
- Does he or she have access to an adequate supply of any prescription or over-the-counter medications to maintain his or her health?
- Can he or she safely store and access his or her medications (some may need to be refrigerated or stored on ice)?

Access to help:

- Does he or she have access to a phone that works, even if the power goes out (cordless phones and voice-over-IP service may not work during a power outage)?
- If he or she has a cell phone for emergencies, is the phone sufficiently charged?
- Instead of asking, “do you have someone to call if you need help?” questions such as, “show me how you would call your daughter if you need her to come help” will be more effective.

How to assist an older adult who appears to need help

Occasionally, during extreme situations, an older adult may appear confused or disoriented. Don't assume this is a normal reaction or due to dementia. Conditions such as dehydration, stress and fatigue can have the same symptoms. When assisting someone who appears confused or disoriented:

- Always treat adults as adults!
- Be friendly, calm and reassuring. Make eye contact and speak slowly and distinctly. Invite him or her to sit with you and have a conversation.
- Use positive language. Instead of “Don't go there,” say “Let's go here.”
- Ask open-ended questions. Instead of “Do you have enough to eat?” ask “What do you plan on having for breakfast/lunch/dinner?” Ask one question at a time and give time to respond.
- Avoid challenging questions. Instead of “Do you know where you are?” say “I'm glad that I came to visit you at your home today.”
- Redirect, don't correct. When someone is confused, he or she may think you are someone you aren't. If he or she calls you another name, say “I haven't seen 'Joe,' but my name is _____ and I'm here to help.”