



**CASCADE MEDICAL**  
PARTNERS IN YOUR HEALTH

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## **Prevent slips, trips and falls**

A light rain had fallen when I started my first night in the emergency department at Cascade Medical Center. I am a medical student at the University of Washington in Leavenworth for my family medicine rotation. The sidewalks were not yet icy, but our first patient had slipped on the stairs at a downtown restaurant. He fell with his arm out behind him and injured his shoulder. He spent the rest of his weekend trip in a sling, but he was lucky and walked away without any broken bones.

This time of year, as surfaces stay wet and the temperatures drop, we see more people who slip and fall outside, tourists and locals alike. The changing weather is a good reminder of ways to prevent slips and falls outside and inside, especially for older adults.

Falls are a major cause of injury in adults over 65. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in five falls result in serious injury. Washington state has a higher rate of deaths from falls than the national average. We had 20,000 fall-related hospitalizations in 2010.

Falls also result in more time spent in nursing homes. In 2008, only 22 percent of people hospitalized for falls in Washington were discharged to their home independently. Over half spent time in a skilled nursing facility.

For younger residents and visitors, a little extra vigilance is protection enough. Watching your step, using handrails, not getting distracted by smartphones while walking, and trying not to overdo it on Leavenworth's excellent selection of beers and wines can go miles in terms of keeping you out of the emergency room.

As we get older, our muscle strength decreases and we can become more unsteady on our feet. This can be a big cause of falls in seniors. Regular exercise can slow down and reverse this process. It does not need to be anything complicated – simple walking can do wonders. Tai Chi is also excellent for building the strength and balance that will keep you from falling. If you have a disability or other troubles with exercise, talk to your healthcare provider about what might work for you.

If your healthcare provider recommends a walking aid such as a cane, there is no shame in using it. Some people feel that doing so is “admitting defeat” and leave it in the closet, which can be dangerous. Also, get your vision checked regularly to help avoid missteps and tripping.

Many falls happen at home because of easy-to-fix hazards. Here are a few tips:

- Area rugs and electrical cords running across the floor are tripping hazards
- Make sure stairs are clear and have a stable handrail.
- Grab bars in the shower and near the toilet are helpful.
- A non-slip rubber mat for the shower is inexpensive and easy to install.

These are all simple things to think about this winter to help you stay on your feet. For more information, visit the CDC website at: [www.cdc.gov/steady/patient.html](http://www.cdc.gov/steady/patient.html). Or, stop by the family practice lobby at Cascade Medical Center for a collection of helpful checklists and guides.