

Preventing Falls

Persons with an intellectual or developmental disability can be at greater risk of falling and injury than the general population. What's more, a fall – even one that does not result in injury – can lead to a fear of falling, which could cause individuals to limit their activities. The following are some factors that can increase the risk of falling, and tips to decrease that risk.

Factors which increase the risk of falling:

- History of previous falls and fear of falling;
- Use of medications associated with increased fall risk – benzodiazepines, first generation antihistamines, muscle relaxants, long-acting oral hypoglycemics, tertiary tricyclic antidepressants, anticonvulsants;
- Chronic medical conditions including, but are not limited to, Parkinson's disease, seizure disorders, complications of diabetes, vertigo, cerebral palsy, arthritis, sleep disturbances, dementia, low blood pressure, osteoporosis and bowel/bladder changes;
- Low eyesight and/or hearing; not using adaptive equipment such as glasses or hearing aids;
- Unsteady gait or balance;
- Use of a walking aid (eg, cane, walker);
- Muscle weakness and/or spasticity;
- Pain, especially pain in multiple body locations;
- Decreased sense of touch or response to pain;
- Environmental factors such as poor lighting, uneven, slippery floors and surfaces, clutter or unstable furniture;
- Inappropriate, poor quality or ill-fitting clothing or footwear;
- Improper, broken, or damaged adaptive equipment;
- Absence of environmental adaptations where needed (especially grab bars in bedrooms and bathrooms).

To decrease the risk of falls:

- Encourage all individuals to attend their regularly scheduled medical and therapy appointments. Ask their medical practitioner and/or therapist to perform a falls risk assessment, using a tool such as the STEADI Tool Kit (referenced below) and make recommendations as part of their annual physical exam.
- Control and eliminate environmental risk factors noted above and perform regular environmental checks in homes and other settings where individuals work and recreate. See OPWDD Fall Prevention Environmental Review tools at https://opwdd.ny.gov/dqi/provider-quality/health-safety/managing-risk/fall_environmental_review_checklist
- When a person falls, their treatment team should discuss and act to minimize the risk of future falls with input from the individual. Each person's falls risk assessment should be evaluated at regular intervals by the treatment team or in clinical meetings. See the OPWDD Post-Fall Review tools at https://opwdd.ny.gov/dqi/provider-quality/health-safety/managing-risk/post-fall_review_checklist
- Look for ways to incorporate strength and balance building activities in each person's daily life with input from professional physical and occupational therapists.
- Encourage persons to wear proper fitting shoes and avoid loose slippers or socks indoors. Replace ill-fitting and/or deteriorated footwear promptly.
- If your agency does not have a falls prevention program or training, advocate for change.

Helpful links:

- The CDC has helpful tools for fall prevention. The STEADI Tool Kit can be accessed at <http://www.cdc.gov/steady/index.html>
- The University of Massachusetts Medical School Center for Disabilities Evaluation and Research at <https://shriver.umassmed.edu/programs/cdder/webinars/falls-prevention-and-intervention-strategies>