



**ER 101**

**What To Know *BEFORE* You Go**

# Health and Safety Checklist for Seniors



**Be Prepared for a  
Medical Emergency!**

**[www.ER101.org](http://www.ER101.org)**



American College of  
Emergency Physicians®

ADVANCING EMERGENCY CARE 

# Health and Safety Checklist for Seniors

**Did you know that seniors are expected to be 20 percent of the U.S. population by the year 2030?**

*As of 2009, 15 percent of all visits to emergency departments were by people ages 65 and older, but that number is expected to grow a lot as Baby Boomers enter retirement.*

*With this in mind, emergency physicians offer suggestions on how to reduce your risk of illness and injury, as well as on how to plan ahead to make an ER visit, if you have one, a little less stressful.*



*Exercise regularly if your doctor tells you it is safe to do so. Exercising for flexibility, strength and balance may help you live longer and more independently, no matter what your age.*

## Protect Your Health

Emergency physicians recommend the following to reduce your chances of illness or injury:

- Exercise regularly if your doctor tells you it is safe to do so. Exercising for flexibility, strength and balance may help you live longer and more independently, no matter what your age. It may also reduce your risk of heart disease, depression and other illnesses. You can strengthen your heart by “mall walking,” swimming, treadmill walking, stationary bike riding and weight training.
- Take calcium and vitamin D supplements and eat a nutritious diet. Calcium and vitamin D will strengthen bones and reduce the risk of osteoporosis and bone fractures.
- Have a doctor check your eyes and ears annually for any changes in your vision or hearing. Also keep your prescriptions for glasses and hearing aids current.
- Get a cholesterol test at least every 5 years, as high cholesterol can cause heart disease and other life-threatening problems.
- Ask a health care professional to give you a diabetes test, especially if you have a relative with the disease, if you are overweight or if you feel hungry or thirsty all the time.
- Have a health care professional check your blood pressure at least once a year. High blood pressure is a “silent killer” because it has no symptoms in its early phase but can cause many health problems if left untreated.
- Get a flu shot every year. Ask your physician about keeping up to date on other vaccines, such as those for pneumonia, shingles, pertussis and tetanus.
- If you drink alcohol, limit yourself to one drink a day. Alcohol can alter balance, leading to falls. Also be aware of any effect alcohol may have on prescription or other medications you are taking. Never drink and drive.

# Be Prepared for a Medical Emergency!

- Be aware of the side effects and possible interactions from over-the-counter and prescription drugs you are taking. Check with your physician or pharmacist about medicines you are taking for these and other potential problems :

- *Blood thinners and diabetes drugs resulted in the most ER visits for drug reactions among seniors, according to a study published in the New England Journal of Medicine in 2011. If you are taking these medications, check with your doctor about monitoring your dose.*
- *Drugs that affect alertness – such as sleeping aids and pain medications – can increase the risk of falls.*
- *Some drug combinations may cause dizziness or confusion.*

## Reduce Your Risk of Falling

Falls account for up to 30 percent of emergency visits among seniors and 10 percent of falls among seniors require hospitalization. Fortunately, many falls can be prevented. Here are some suggestions for reducing your risk of falling:

- **Wear comfortable, high-quality footwear appropriate for the activity and the weather.** Flat shoes with non-skid soles, such as good quality sneakers, are the best on dry ground. When it is wet, icy or snowy outside, wear shoes or boots designed for those conditions. Tie your shoelaces or close self-fasteners securely. If you wear slippers around the house, they should fit properly. If you are having foot problems, talk to your physician.
- **Fall-proof your home.** Remove loose papers, books, shoes and other clutter underfoot. Secure or get rid of loose rugs. Install handrails in stairwells, and grip bars, non-skid strips and other safety devices in the tub or shower. Make a dark hallway safer by installing nightlights.



*Have a plan for who to call if you fall. It could be 9-1-1, a relative or friend, or a medical alarm service. Consider wearing a “panic button” that calls automatically for help when you are unable to do so because of illness or injury.*

- Know the risks caused by certain illnesses, such as Parkinson’s disease, Alzheimer’s disease or stroke. These can lead to an unbalanced gait, weakness, dizziness or nausea, all of which may cause a fall. If you are unsure, ask your physician.
- Have a plan for who to call if you fall. It could be 9-1-1, a relative or friend, or a medical alarm service. Consider wearing a “panic button” that calls automatically for help when you are unable to do so because of illness or injury.

# What to Expect in the ER

## Prepare for a Medical Emergency

Even with the best planning and medical care, some trips to the emergency department can't be avoided. To make those trips a little easier, emergency physicians recommend that you do the following before you have an emergency:

- **Write down or type a health history and keep it in your wallet or purse. You may also want to keep this information in your refrigerator, along with the name and number of someone to call on your behalf, in case someone else is taking you to the hospital. Many EMS providers will know to look there. The health history should include:**
  - *Your medications, including vitamins, food supplements and over-the-counter medicines*
  - *Allergies, current and past medical diagnoses and treatments (including surgeries)*
  - *The name and phone number of your doctor or doctors*
  - *If you have one, a copy of your most recent electrocardiogram test or EKG.*

Forms are available at

<http://www.emergencycareforyou.org/medicalforms> to make this process easier.

- **If you carry a cell phone, program I-C-E into it (for In Case of Emergency) with the name and phone number of someone who knows you and your medical history. That way, if you are unable to speak for yourself, nurses and doctors at the ER will know whom to call for you.**
- **If you have legal papers related to your medical care – such as a power of attorney, living will, advanced directive or do not resuscitate order (DNR) – bring these with you to the ER and make sure your family is aware of your wishes. Like your medical history, these documents should be in a very visible place in your home (such as the refrigerator) in case someone else takes you to the hospital.**



## At the Emergency Department

- **Bring something to read or do, such as a crossword puzzle. It will keep you calmer and help pass the time. This is also a good idea for anyone who might go with you to the ER.**
- **Be prepared for a hospital stay. Take a change of clothes and whatever personal items you will need (eyeglasses, for example).**
- **Do not downplay your symptoms. Emergency physicians are experts at treating all medical emergencies, but they need complete information from you in order to give you the best possible care.**
- **Be patient. Diagnosing and treating an illness or injury can sometimes take many hours. If you feel you need more attention than you are getting, ask to speak to a patient advocate.**