

Falls and Visual Impairment

Because of a recent stroke and my diabetes, I am experiencing some vision loss and am concerned about my safety. What should I do?

Diabetes is a progressive disease with systemic risks, including increased risk of falls likely due to decreased vision, impaired contrast sensitivity, possible impaired range of motion, weakness of extremities and peripheral neuropathy.

Since you have also suffered a stroke, you may have a loss of peripheral field of vision that impacts safe mobility and travel, either because you are not aware of your field loss or have not learned how to compensate for that loss.

Fellow colleagues, Crew, Jones and Kim, have found in their study that 65 percent of older adults with vision loss and stroke reported difficulty walking, 54 percent reported difficulty climbing stairs and 41 percent reported difficulty with shopping.

More than one third of adults 65 and older fall each year in the United States. Among older adults, falls are the leading cause of injury deaths. Falls are also a common reason for hospital admissions for trauma and account for 90 percent of fractures.

People who have a visual impairment are twice as likely to experience a fall as individuals who are not visually impaired. If you have trouble seeing in your home, review the lighting both for enhancing your environment and also the contrast of objects located in the room, while making sure not to create unnecessary glare that might make travel unsafe.

Older adults can prevent falls and protect their independence in several ways:

- Exercise regularly.
- Ask your doctor or pharmacist to review your prescription and over-the-counter medications to reduce side effects.
- Have your eyes checked by an eye doctor at least once a year.
- Improve the lighting in your home.
- Reduce hazards in your home that can lead to falls.

Most importantly, if your vision limits you from activities that you enjoy and makes it difficult to identify faces, prepare meals, read or safely walk, you should see your optometrist or ophthalmologist.

Your doctor may recommend referral to low vision rehabilitation professionals who can help improve your personal safety and help you maintain your independence.