STAIRS

How do I make stairs and steps safer?

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Most stair falls can be made less likely with a few changes: handrails on both sides for the full length, light switches at the top and bottom, and step edges that clearly stand out. How you use the stairs matters just as much as how they are built. Carry less, keep one hand free and never rush.

Even a few steps count

Many Tampa Bay homes are single story, but that does not mean there are no steps. Think about the front stoop, the step down into the garage, the step out to the lanai and the step into a sunken living room. Short runs of one or two steps are easy to forget, and that is part of the danger.

Railings: both sides, full length

- **Install rails on both sides** of every staircase, running the full length. A rail on both sides means you always have your stronger hand on one, going up and coming down.
- **Add rails at entry steps.** Front, back and side entries often have missing or loose railings. An outdoor grab bar by the door also helps while you work the key or the door handle.
- **Check that rails are solid.** Give each one a firm tug. A loose rail can be worse than none, because you trust it.
- **Hire a qualified installer.** Rails and grab bars need solid anchoring into the structure.

For reference, the 2010 ADA Standards give grab bar dimensions (1.25 to 2 inch diameter with 1.5 inches of wall clearance). Those standards are not required in private homes, but they are a sound guide when choosing hardware.

Light the whole staircase

- Put light switches at both the top and the bottom.
- Add motion lights at entries, so the steps light up as you arrive.
- Replace dim bulbs and repair dark spots, especially on outdoor steps.

Make every edge easy to see

Older eyes need about three times as much contrast to see an edge. When steps are all one color, the edge of each step can disappear.

- Put **contrasting tape or nosing** on the edge of each step and on thresholds.
- Use **adhesive treads** for grip.
- Watch the **last step.** When the bottom step is the same color as the floor, people often think they have reached the bottom too soon. Painting or marking the floor at the base of the stairs in a contrasting color helps.
- Avoid busy patterns on stairs. Patterned carpet and tile can hide edges.

Glasses and stairs

Bifocals and other multifocal lenses blur the ground when you look down, which is exactly what you do on stairs. For active people who wear multifocals, single-lens distance glasses for walking outdoors and on stairs reduce falls. Ask your eye doctor about a pair.

New glasses can briefly raise fall risk too. Practice on stairs with someone nearby until they feel natural.

Safe stair habits

- **Carry less.** Make two trips instead of one, and keep a hand free for the rail.
- **Count the steps** in your home so you know when the last one is coming.
- **Never rush to answer the phone.** Let it ring; keep your phone on your body instead.
- **Stop talking when you climb.** Give the stairs your full attention, especially in a crowd or on uneven ground.
- **Wear safe shoes.** Avoid socks, backless slippers and worn treads.
- **Keep stairs clear.** Nothing should be "parked" on a step to carry up later.

Signs the stairs are getting harder

If you or your parent have trouble stepping up onto a curb, need to pull hard on the rail, or have started to avoid the stairs or outings, that is worth noticing. These can be signs of weaker leg muscles or balance changes. A physical therapist can help, because strength and balance training is the most effective way to prevent falls.

If climbing is no longer realistic, there are other choices: a threshold ramp, a full ramp or a lift. Our article What's the difference between a ramp, a threshold ramp and a lift? explains the options. Stair lifts are generally not covered by Original Medicare.

How Home Safety Solutions can help

On a home safety visit, we watch how you actually use your steps: where your hand goes, how you carry things and how you handle the last step. Then we rank what to fix first, from free habit changes to rails and lighting. Learn what happens during a home safety visit. Call (813) 365-9171 or email info@homesafety.solutions.

Related reading: How do I make a sunken living room safe for a walker? · Is a lanai sliding door a fall risk? · Should we buy a one-story home before retiring in Florida? · CDC Check for Safety checklist (PDF) · Is it normal to fall as you get older?

This article is general education, not medical advice. Talk with your doctor, pharmacist, or therapist about your own situation.

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