

# Staying active and on your feet



Health

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Department of Health and Ageing

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*The information included in this resource is provided for general information only and is not a substitute for independent medical advice. Please consult your health care provider if you have or suspect you have a health problem. Use of the exercises, advice, and information contained in this resource is at the sole choice and risk of the reader.*

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# Staying active



Staying physically active is the single most important thing we can do to stay well and independent.

Staying physically active is the single most important thing we can do to stay fit and independent.

As we grow older we lose muscle strength and sense of balance and this can lead to a fall. The more active we remain, the better the chance of keeping our muscles strong, our joints mobile and maintaining our sense of balance.

Staying active reduces our risk of a fall, which helps keeps us independent and improves our overall health and wellbeing.

How much activity is enough? At least 30 minutes a day, five days a week, is recommended. The exercise should be brisk enough to increase your breathing and heart rate, although it doesn't have to be so hard that you can't talk.

Activities to get your heart rate up and help build fitness include:

- aqua aerobics
- brisk walking
- golf
- group exercise classes
- swimming.

To reduce your risk of falling, it's also important to include activities that improve your sense of balance and increase your strength. Try to include these into your routine every day.

Activities which are particularly good for balance and flexibility include:

- dancing
- gym sessions
- group exercise classes
- home exercises
- lawn bowls
- pilates
- Tai Chi
- yoga.

These types of activity have plenty of benefits. They help keep your heart strong, your blood pressure down, and your weight down. By improving your balance and strength, you reduce your risk of falling and causing an injury or breaking a bone. And they keep you active enough to do the things you want to do, whether that be getting out of the chair easily or maintaining the garden.

Try to mix up the activities — this will exercise different muscles and helps keep you interested. You don't have to do it all in one go — being active in 10–15 minute slots during the day works just as well.

Age is no barrier — research shows that any exercise, at any age, is worth the effort. If you are in any doubt about exercises, please talk to your doctor.

By improving your balance and strength, you reduce your risk of falling and causing an injury or breaking a bone.



# Exercise at home

The following balance and strength exercises are easy to do at home. Make sure you have a chair, benchtop or wall nearby for support when you try them. Once you become more confident, you can hold for longer or increase the number of repetitions. Use smooth movements when performing these exercises and take your time.

## 1. Heel to toe standing / walking

- Helps keep balance when you have to walk through a narrow space
- With fingertips on something solid to help balance, stand heel to toe, bend your knees slightly and keep still for 10 seconds.
- Vary the exercise by walking slowly, placing your heel to touch the toe of the other foot.



## 2. Knee raises

- Helps with climbing stairs and getting in and out of cars and buses
- With fingertips on something solid to help balance, lift a knee to hip level and hold it for 5 seconds.
- Repeat with the other leg.
- Then repeat 8 times.

## 3. Side leg raise / sideways walking

- Improves stability when you have to take weight on one leg, and helps you step sideways to avoid tripping
- With fingertips on something solid to help balance, stand on one leg and raise the other sideways, holding it for 5 seconds.
- Repeat 8 times.
- Then do it with the other leg.
- Extend to walking sideways with slow steps alongside a bench or table.





#### 4. Heel raise

- Helps with walking and climbing stairs
- With fingertips on something solid to help balance, lift both heels off the floor and stand on your toes for 3 seconds, then slowly lower your heels to the floor.
- Repeat 5 times.

#### 5. Stepping up a step

- Improves stability on steps, paths and uneven surfaces
- Holding onto a rail, go up and down a single step.
- Repeat 5 times.



#### 6. Sit to stand

- Helps with getting up and down from a chair or toilet, and in and out of the car
- Stand up slowly from a chair, keeping your knees slightly apart. To make it harder, cross your arms in front of your chest or hold them out in front of you at shoulder height.
- Then lower yourself back down into the chair.
- Repeat 5 times.
- If this is too strong for your knees, start off using a chair with armrests to push off from.





# Healthy eating



Many people don't drink enough water. Dehydration is a common cause of older people falling and hurting themselves.

Eating healthy food in a balanced diet is very important to help you get the energy you need, maintain good health and have strong bones and muscles.

We all know what healthy food is — a wide range of fruit and vegetables, some protein sources such as meats, dairy and pulses, and not too much fatty or highly processed food. Drinking plenty of water is important, too.

As we age, our bones are susceptible to becoming fragile and breaking. For them to stay strong, they need:

- calcium
- vitamin D.

## Calcium

Calcium is only stored in your bones, although it is essential for many different parts of the body, such as muscles and nerves.

If you don't eat enough calcium, it will be taken from your bones to other parts of the body where it is needed. As we get older, we absorb less and less calcium from our food. This means we actually need to eat more calcium as we get older.

People who smoke, who drink a lot of caffeine and soft drinks, and who eat a lot of meat, absorb less calcium from their diet than others.



Milk, yoghurt, cheese, salmon, sardines, tahini, figs, almonds and brazil nuts are all good sources of calcium.

Bread, cereals, fruit and green vegetables such as broccoli and bok choy also have calcium, although not as much.

The following menu is an example of a typical day's eating that would help you reach the recommended intake of calcium (1300 mg per day).

Breakfast: Toast or muesli plus a tub of low fat yoghurt

Lunch: Wholemeal sandwich with cheese, chicken and salad

Dinner: Pasta or rice with tinned salmon or tuna and vegetables such as peas, broccoli and carrots

Snacking on fresh or dried fruit, cheese, and nuts and a glass of milk/soy milk each day will make up the rest. Calcium-enriched breads, juice and milk can be good sources for additional calcium.



## Vitamin D and sunlight

Vitamin D is very important for strong bones. Being low in vitamin D can affect your muscle strength and play a part in osteoporosis because without it calcium won't be fully absorbed by your bones.

You get vitamin D in two ways — from your diet and from sunlight.

Vitamin D is found only in certain foods. These are:

- milk
- oily fish such as salmon and mackerel
- eggs.

Sunlight is another way of getting vitamin D. Sunlight acts on the skin and converts it to vitamin D. Six to eight minutes a day is enough.

## Water

Many people don't drink enough water. Lack of water can lead to dehydration, weakness and dizziness, and is a common cause of older people falling and hurting themselves.

Drink at least six glasses of fluid a day, preferably water.

# Your health



Have regular check-ups and ask your health professional for advice on activities to improve balance and strength.

A number of health conditions can affect your ability to move around or make you feel unsteady on your feet. These conditions include arthritis, osteoporosis, diabetes, heart problems, depression, Parkinson's disease and dementia.

These conditions may increase the risk of losing your balance, tripping and falling. Even short-term illnesses (such as the flu or other infections) can affect your stability.

Have regular check-ups and talk to your health professional for advice on how these conditions might affect you. You can also get advice on activities you can safely do to regain balance, strength and confidence.

## Eyesight

Our eyes change rapidly as we age, and it becomes more difficult to judge distances, cope with glare and adjust to sudden changes in light. This can affect your ability to see the edges of steps and stairs.

Bifocal, trifocal or multifocal glasses increase the chances of falling, as the changes in the lens can make it difficult to judge distances and see objects on the ground.

Other eye conditions, such as macular degeneration, glaucoma, cataracts, and diabetic retinopathy, impair vision. They may require you to learn new skills to move around safely.

Have your eyes checked by an optometrist or ophthalmologist at least every two years, and by your doctor in the years between.

Consider having a separate pair of glasses for walking outdoors.

Give your eyes time to adjust to sudden changes in light, and ensure that you have good lighting at home and on stairs.

If you get new glasses or any treatment for your eyes, be especially careful. You will need to allow your eyesight time to adjust.

## Mobility and walking aids

A walking aid may help improve your safety and mobility.

If you think that this would benefit you, talk to a health professional such as a physiotherapist or occupational therapist. They will be able to suggest the most suitable aid for you and show you how to use the aid safely and confidently.

If you do use a walking aid at home, you might need to rearrange your furniture so that you can move around easily.

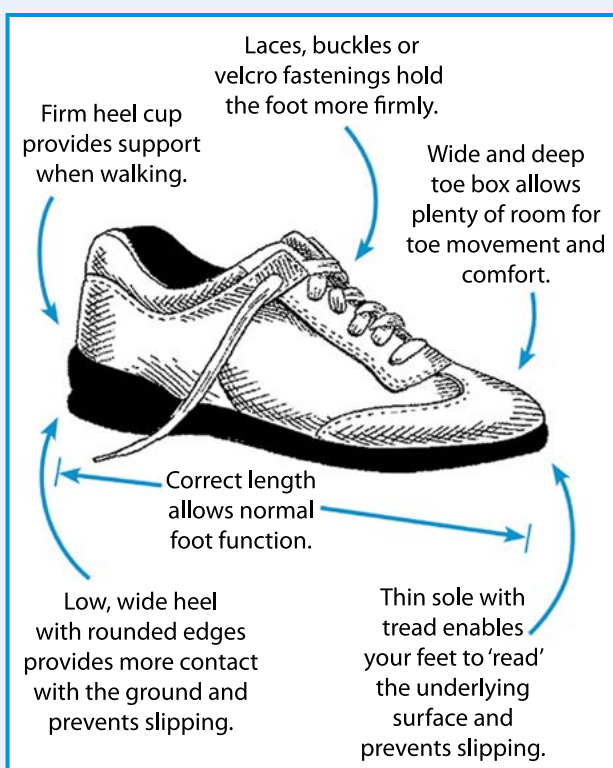
## Footwear

Healthy feet and well-fitted footwear help reduce your chances of tripping and falling.

Keep your feet healthy by keeping nails trimmed and getting treatment for bunions, corns and calluses.

The safest footwear has:

- thin firm soles with a tread
- low square heels
- a firm support around the heel to improve stability.



# Your medicines



People who take four or more medicines a day are at particularly high risk of falling.

Some medicines—whether they are prescription medicines or those bought without prescription — can make you dizzy or drowsy. This can predispose you to falling over.

The medicines that make falls more likely include those for:

- anxiety
- depression
- sleeping difficulties.

People who take four or more medicines a day are at particularly high risk of falling.

See the National Prescribing Service website ([www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)) for a list of questions you may like to ask your doctor or pharmacist about the medicines you are taking.

## Tips

- Make a list of every medicine you take, and take it with you when you go to see a doctor or pharmacist. This list should include any herbs, tablets or supplements you buy from a health food store or from the health food section of the supermarket, as well as any medicines you buy from a pharmacy.



- Ask your doctor to review this list thoroughly. Doing this every six months is a good idea if you take four or more medicines a day. Otherwise, once a year is enough.
- If you find it difficult to remember which medications you take and when to take them, ask your pharmacist or doctor about devices that may help such as pill boxes or Webster-paks®.
- If you feel dizzy or find it hard to concentrate, contact your doctor or pharmacist straight away.
- If you take anticoagulant medicines (blood-thinners), you should always see a doctor if you have a fall, as you may be at risk of severe injury and bleeding.
- Avoid sleeping tablets if possible.
- Only take your own medicines and don't use someone else's, even if they are for the same condition.

#### Ways to improve your chances of a good night's sleep:

- get into a good relaxing bedtime routine
- go to bed at about the same time each night
- get up at about the same time each day
- restrict alcohol, caffeine and smoking, which are all stimulants.



Webster-paks®—Image courtesy of Queensland Health

# Health & lifestyle checklist

If you answer **Yes** to most of these questions, then you are doing well.

If you answer **No** or **Not always** or **Not sure** to more than one of the questions, then you may be at risk of a fall. You might like to discuss this checklist during your next appointment with a health professional.

	Yes	Not Always	No
<b>Staying active</b>			
Do you engage in physical activity (e.g. walking, swimming or group exercise) for 30 minutes or more, most days of the week?			
Do you include balance and strength activities such as dancing, Tai Chi, yoga or an exercise session provided by a health professional or a fitness instructor?			
<b>Calcium, vitamin D and water</b>			
Do you eat three healthy meals per day?			
Do you eat at least 3–4 serves of high calcium foods (milk, yoghurt, cheese, almonds or salmon) per day?			
Do you spend a little bit of time in the sun? (6–8 minutes, 4–6 times per week, is plenty.)			
Do you drink 4–6 glasses of water (or other fluids) per day?			
<b>Getting out and about</b>			
Can you get out of a chair easily?			
Is it easy for you to maintain your balance when walking?			

	Yes	Not Always	No
<b>Managing health conditions</b>			
Does your current health allow you to confidently manage all your normal activities?			
Can you stand up and move around without feeling light-headed, dizzy or faint?			
Do you have good control of your bladder and bowel so that you can get to the toilet without rushing?			

	Yes	Not Sure	No
<b>Eyesight</b>			
Have you had your eyes examined in the last 12 months?			
<b>Feet</b>			
Have you had your feet checked for corns, bunions or other foot problems that may cause pain and may affect your balance?			
<b>Medicines</b>			
Have you had your medications reviewed by your doctor in the last 12 months?			
<b>History of falling</b>			
Have you stayed on your feet (been free of falls) for at least the last 6 months?			

# If you have a fall ...

Knowing what to do if you do have a fall can help you feel more confident.

It is important to have an emergency plan:

- know who to call for help — you could keep a list of the phone numbers of family or friends near the phone, or program them into the phone for one-touch dialling
- have a phone within reach on a low table, in case it is hard to get up
- protect yourself by considering whether you would want a device that raises an alarm in case of emergency
- let trusted family and friends know how to get into your house if you can't let them in.

The following technique for getting up if you do fall is worth knowing:



*1. Roll onto your side*

It is important to have an emergency plan.





2. *Crawl or drag yourself to a chair*



3. *Face the chair and get up on your knees*



4. *Bring one knee forward and put that foot on the floor, then use the chair to push up with your arms until you are upright enough to pivot your bottom around to sit*



5. *Rest for a while before standing up*

If you can't bend your knees very well, slide along on your bottom then lift your hips onto something higher, such as stairs. Then you can pull yourself upright again.

You might even like to practise these techniques so that if you ever need to get up from the floor, you will feel more confident.

You should see your doctor after a fall if:

- you are taking anticoagulant medicines
- you bump your head and feel drowsy or unwell afterwards
- you have a pain that concerns you
- you are worried about your balance.

# Home safety checklist

About half of all falls occur in and around the home. You can reduce your chances of having a fall at home by making sure that you have followed some basic home safety guidelines.

This checklist will help you identify aspects of your home that might increase your risk of a fall. Walk around each room and check that there is nothing that might pose a risk. For small safety improvements, see if a family member, friend or local handyperson can help you fix the problem. A health professional can also arrange for an occupational therapist to perform a home safety assessment and arrange for installation of home modifications.

	Yes	No
<b>Entrance and hallway</b>		
Light switches easy to reach and near each doorway or hallway		
Doorbell easy to hear from other rooms		
Rugs or mats with slip-resistant backing		
<b>Stairs and steps</b>		
Light switch at both the top and bottom of stairways		
Stairs and steps well lit		
Carpets or runners securely fixed		
Sturdy handrail		
Edges of steps clearly marked		
Non-skid treads or paint used on the edges of each step		
<b>Kitchen</b>		
Regularly used items within easy reach without climbing or bending		
Good lighting over benchtops and other work areas		
Good ventilation to reduce the risk of glasses fogging		
Floor surfaces slip resistant		
Spills cleaned up straight away		
Sturdy low step stool with handrail if need to use higher shelves		

	Yes	No
<b>Lounge/Dining room</b>		
Good light (natural or artificial)		
Carpets and mats lie flat without wrinkles, curled or frayed edges		
Furniture arranged so that it is easy to walk around		
Cords and cables safely away from walkways		
Lounge chair easy to get out of		
Telephone within easy reach		
<b>Bedroom</b>		
Bed easy to get in and out of		
Bedside light easy to switch on when in bed		
Telephone within easy reach when in bed		
Bedside table for drink, books, glasses		
Bed coverings clear of the floor		
Cords and cables safely away from walkways		
Walking aid (if required) within easy reach of the bed		
<b>Bathroom and toilet</b>		
Slip-resistant mats on the floor		
Shower easy to access without stepping over a raised edge or hob		
Secure handrail in shower or on wall next to bath to avoid holding on to taps or towel rail to get out		
Soap and shampoo within easy reach without bending		
Towel rail within easy reach from bath or shower		
Handrail next to toilet		
Good lighting where medicines kept		
<b>Outside the home</b>		
Paths and entrances well lit at night		
Paths in good repair		
Steps with a sturdy, easy-to-grip handrail		
Edges of steps clearly marked and with slip-resistant strip		
Stepladder short and sturdy with slip-resistant feet		
Clothes line easy to access and reach		
Garden kept free of trip hazards, such as tools and hoses		
Garage / shed uncluttered and floors free of oil and grease		
Footpaths and public areas in good repair		

# Fall-proof yourself

## Q. Are you active and on your feet?

Being physically active is important to stay well, independent and to do everyday tasks.

Do balance and strength exercises

## Q. Is your vision changing?

As we grow older our vision changes. We do not see as clearly, are less able to judge distance and depth, and adjust to sudden changes in light.

Have your eyes checked

## Q. Are you taking medications?

Some medicines can increase your risk of falls, especially those taken for anxiety, depression or difficulty sleeping. Medication may make you feel drowsy, unsteady, dizzy or confused.

Talk to your doctor

## Q. Are your feet sore?

Feet can change shape and lose some feeling. Painful and swollen feet make it difficult to walk and some shoes or slippers may cause you to stumble or trip.

Have your feet checked and wear comfortable, firm-fitting, flat shoes

## Q. Are you deficient in Vitamin D?

Being deficient in Vitamin D can affect your bone and muscle strength as this vitamin helps our bodies to absorb calcium from food.

Talk to your doctor  
Visit [www.osteoporosis.org.au](http://www.osteoporosis.org.au)



# Useful contacts

## AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT

### Aged Care Australia

[www.agedcareaustralia.gov.au](http://www.agedcareaustralia.gov.au)

Ph: 1800 500 853

### Commonwealth Carelink Services

[www9.health.gov.au/ccsd](http://www9.health.gov.au/ccsd)

Ph: 1800 052 222 (free call)

Information centres for older people, people with disabilities and those who provide care and services.

### Department of Health and Ageing

#### Ambassador for Ageing

[www.health.gov.au/ambassadorforageing](http://www.health.gov.au/ambassadorforageing)

### Healthdirect Australia

[www.healthdirect.org.au](http://www.healthdirect.org.au)

Ph: 1800 022 222

Free 24-hour telephone health advice service line staffed by registered nurses to provide expert health advice.

### Veterans Affairs

[www.dva.gov.au](http://www.dva.gov.au)

Ph: 13 32 54 or 1800 555 254

Offers support and services for people eligible for assistance.

## NSW GOVERNMENT

### NSW Health

[www.health.nsw.gov.au](http://www.health.nsw.gov.au)

Ph: 02 9391 9000

Provides information and links to public health services within NSW, and access to health professionals such as community nurses, dentists, dietitians, doctors, occupational therapists, optometrists, pharmacists, physiotherapists, podiatrists and psychologists etc.

### Aboriginal Home Care Service

Ph: 1300 797 606

### Get Healthy Information and Coaching Service

[www.gethealthynsw.com.au](http://www.gethealthynsw.com.au)

Ph: 1300 806 258

### Home and Community Care (HACC)

Ph: 02 8270 2000

### Home Care Service Hunter/Central Coast and rural regions

Ph: 1300 881 144

### Home Care Service Sydney Metropolitan Area

Ph: 1800 350 792

### Home Modification Information Clearinghouse

[www.homemods.info](http://www.homemods.info)

Ph: 02 9385 5357 or 1800 305 486

Provides a range of consumer factsheets and information on home maintenance and modifications

### Human Services—Ageing Disability and Home Care

[www.dadhc.nsw.gov.au](http://www.dadhc.nsw.gov.au)

The NSW Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care administer the HACC Program in NSW. The program helps frail older people and people with a disability who would otherwise be prematurely or inappropriately admitted to residential care to live independently in their own home.

### NSW Falls Prevention Network

<http://fallsnetwork.neura.edu.au>

Information on healthy ageing for consumers and health professionals.

## COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

### Alzheimers Australia

[www.alzheimers.org.au](http://www.alzheimers.org.au)

Ph: 1800 100 50 (national dementia helpline)

### Alzheimers Australia NSW

Ph: 02 9805 0100

### Arthritis NSW

[www.arthritisnsw.org.au](http://www.arthritisnsw.org.au)

Ph: 1800 011 041 (free call in NSW)

### Association of Occupational Therapists

[www.ausot.com.au](http://www.ausot.com.au)

Ph: 02 9648 3225

### Australian Association of Social Workers

[www.aasw.asn.au](http://www.aasw.asn.au)

Ph: 02 9518 4944

### Australian Physiotherapy Association

[www.physiotherapy.asn.au](http://www.physiotherapy.asn.au)

Ph: 02 8748 1555

### Australasian Podiatry Council

[www.apodc.com.au](http://www.apodc.com.au)

Ph: 03 9416 3111

# Useful contacts

**Australian Psychological Society**

[www.psychology.org.au](http://www.psychology.org.au)

Ph: 1800 333 497

**Carers NSW**

[www.carersnsw.asn.au](http://www.carersnsw.asn.au)

Ph: 1800 242 636 (free call) 9am to 5pm

After hours service: Call Lifeline 13 11 14

**Continence Foundation of Australia**

[www.continence.org.au](http://www.continence.org.au)

Ph: 1800 330 066

**Continence Foundation of Australia in NSW Inc**

Ph: 02 8741 5699

**COTA (Council on the Ageing) NSW**

[www.cotansw.com.au](http://www.cotansw.com.au)

Ph: 02 9286 3860 or 1800 449 102

**Diabetes Australia NSW**

[www.diabetesnsw.com.au](http://www.diabetesnsw.com.au)

Ph: 1300 136 588

**Dietitians Association of Australia**

[www.daa.asn.au](http://www.daa.asn.au)

Ph: 02 6163 5200 or 1800 812 942

**Fitness Australia**

[www.fitness.org.au](http://www.fitness.org.au)

Ph: 1300 211 311

**Guide Dogs NSW / ACT**

[www.guidedogs.com.au](http://www.guidedogs.com.au)

Ph: 02 9412 9300

**Heartmoves**

[www.heartmoves.heartfoundation.org.au](http://www.heartmoves.heartfoundation.org.au)

**Independent Living Centre NSW**

[www.ilcnsw.asn.au](http://www.ilcnsw.asn.au)

Ph: 1300 885 886 (info line)

Ph: 02 9890 0940 (reception)

**Macular Degeneration Foundation**

[www.mdfoundation.com.au](http://www.mdfoundation.com.au)

Ph: 1800 111 709 (help line)

Ph: 02 9261 8900

**National Ageing Research Institute**

[www.mednwh.unimelb.edu.au/tips\\_on\\_ageing/safe\\_tips.htm](http://www.mednwh.unimelb.edu.au/tips_on_ageing/safe_tips.htm)

Tips on healthy ageing—Safe use of Medicines

**National Heart Foundation**

[www.heartfoundation.org.au](http://www.heartfoundation.org.au)

Ph: 1300 362 787

**National Prescribing Service Limited**

[www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)

Ph: 02 8217 8700 or 1300 888 763 (medicines line) 9am to 5pm

**NSW Meals on Wheels**

[www.nswmealsonwheels.org.au](http://www.nswmealsonwheels.org.au)

Ph: 02 8219 4200

Deliver low-cost nutritious meals

**Nutritionist Society of Australia (Inc.)**

[www.nsa.asn.au](http://www.nsa.asn.au)

Ph: 08 8363 1307

Ph: 02 9845 3142 (Sydney committee)

**Optometrists' Association Australia**

[www.oaansw.com.au](http://www.oaansw.com.au)

Ph: 02 9712 2199

**Osteoporosis Australia**

[www.osteoporosis.org.au](http://www.osteoporosis.org.au)

Ph: 02 9518 8140

**OT Australia NSW**

[www.otnsw.com.au](http://www.otnsw.com.au)

Ph: 02 9648 3225

**Pharmaceutical Society of Australia**

[www.psa.org.au](http://www.psa.org.au)

**Neuroscience Research Australia,****Falls and Balance Group**

[www.neura.edu.au/fbrg](http://www.neura.edu.au/fbrg)

Information and research on falls and balance

**Seniors Information Service**

[www.seniorsinfo.nsw.gov.au](http://www.seniorsinfo.nsw.gov.au)

Ph: 13 12 44

**Speech Pathology Australia**

[www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au](http://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au)

Ph: 03 9642 4899

**Tai Chi Association of Australia**

[www.taichiaustralia.com](http://www.taichiaustralia.com)

**Vision Australia**

[www.visionaustralia.org](http://www.visionaustralia.org)

Ph: 1300 847 466

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## Staying active and on your feet

Keeping physically active is the single most important thing you can do to stay fit and independent.

For more information please visit  
[www.activeandhealthy.nsw.gov.au](http://www.activeandhealthy.nsw.gov.au)