

All Fall Down: How to Cut Your Risk of Falls

By David Schardt

Eighty-four year-old author Kurt Vonnegut fell and hit his head in his apartment last year and died a few weeks later of brain injuries. In 2001, Katherine Graham, publisher of the *Washington Post*, fell and struck her head on a sidewalk. She died three days later.

"About one in three people over the age of 70 will fall each year," says John Morley, a gerontologist at Washington University in St. Louis.

In 2005, close to 16,000 Americans 65 and older died from falls. Another 1.8 million fell and injured themselves seriously enough that they ended up in an emergency room. A quarter of them were admitted to the hospital.

Is there anything you can do to increase the odds of staying on your

feet? Does your diet matter? **Here's how to trim your odds of falling:**

– **Improve Your Balance.** Four good studies in Australia and the U.S. have found that practicing tai chi can lower the risk of falling by one half.

– **Build Your Strength.** "Two months of resistance exercise can reverse two decades of typical muscle strength deterioration," says University of Maryland exercise physiologist Ben Hurley.

– **Don't Skimp on Protein.** Your daily protein target (in grams) should be about half your weight (in pounds).

– **Get Enough Vitamin D.** "Five good studies have shown that supplementing people in their 70s and 80s with 800 to 1,000 IU a day of vitamin D lowers the risk of falling by an average of 20 percent," says Bess Dawson-Hughes, director of the bone metabolism laboratory at

the USDA Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging.

– **Monitor Your Meds.** "The more drugs you're on, the more likely you are to get into trouble," says Washington University's John Morley.

– **Check Your Vision.** "It's important to have your vision checked at least once a year," says the CDC's Judy Stevens.

– **Watch for Low Blood Pressure.** Blood

pressure can plummet suddenly when older people try to stand, which can throw off their balance.

– **Keep Your Home Safe.** "People who don't think they are going to fall won't take protective measures in their home," says Cathy Cole.

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Practicing Tai Chi can slash the risk of falling