



Canadian
Physiotherapy
Association

Healthy and independent living for older adults

Fall prevention

Adults 65 years of age and older are the fastest growing segment of the Canadian population. It is important that the unique health care needs of older adults are met to optimize health, physical function, quality of life and independent living.

Older adults and falls. Why is this important to know?

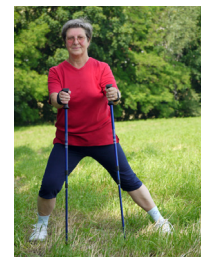
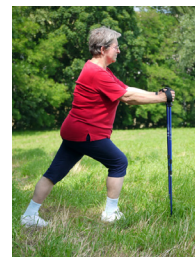
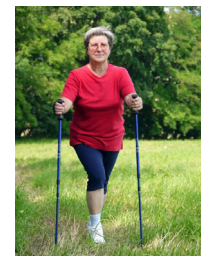
Approximately 30% of older adults will fall at least once each year. An injury, such as a fracture or sprain, will occur in 50% of those who fall. In turn, these injuries can lead to new disability or loss of independence, a fear of falling or withdrawal from participation in normal activities, and sometimes death. Falls account for 84% of injury-related admissions of older adults to hospital, 40% of all nursing home admissions, and a 10% increase in home-care service use. In Canada, it is estimated that the health care costs from falls among older adults are one billion dollars each year.

Considering how frequently older adults fall and the serious consequences that can occur, falls among older adults are an important public health concern.

Falls are not a normal part of aging, however, physical changes that occur with aging can increase the older adult's risk of falling. Some of these changes include declines in muscle strength and flexibility, slower balance reflexes, and vision problems. Diseases can also increase a person's risk for falling such as arthritis, stroke or inner ear problems that cause dizziness. Prescription medications, including those for blood pressure control, can also increase the risk of falling.

Falls can be prevented

The good news is there are effective treatments available to prevent falls and aid an older adult's return to optimal function after a fall. Physiotherapists can help with both of these approaches. The risk of falling in older adults can be reduced when specific exercises, activities and interventions are prescribed by a physiotherapist. Working with a physiotherapist will allow older adults to stay active and remain living independently in the community.



Are you at risk?

It is important to understand that fit or frail, young or old, anyone can have a fall. However, there are some factors that increase the risk for falls for an older adult. To determine if you or a person you care for is at risk of falling, you can answer these six simple questions:

1. Have you fallen in the last year?
2. Are you currently taking four or more prescription medications?
3. Do you have a history of stroke or Parkinson's disease?
4. Do you have any problems with your balance?
5. Are you unable to stand up from a chair without using your arms?
6. Have you limited your recreational or social activities due to a fear of falling?

A **YES** answer to any of these questions indicates an **ELEVATED RISK** for falls.

Answer **YES** to **THREE OR MORE** questions, and there is a **HIGH RISK** of falls.

What you can do?

See a physiotherapist if you are having problems with your balance, especially if you have had a fall, but even if you have not had a fall. If you are taking multiple natural remedies or prescribed medications, your family doctor can also help to rule out possible medical problems that can cause poor balance and falls.

How can physiotherapy help?

Important risk factors for falls include leg weakness and trouble with balance and walking. An assessment by a physiotherapist will include questions about your health and medical history. In addition, physiotherapists will evaluate your physical function by using tests specifically designed to measure your strength, flexibility, balance and walking ability. At the end of the assessment, the physiotherapist will determine any limitations that increase your fall risk and then an individualized exercise program can be prescribed to maintain or regain strength, flexibility and endurance in a way that helps the older adult to feel safe and secure. As the home environment can also be a source for falls, your physiotherapist can also make recommendations to fall proof your home.



Other tips for reducing the risk of falls

- Try to be physically active every day to improve your posture, muscle strength and balance, e.g. enroll in Tai Chi or a supervised exercise program
- Have your vision and hearing checked each year
- Wear a good pair of lace-up shoes that will support your feet and avoid high heels and slippers because they can increase the risk of slipping and losing your balance
- Use aids such as canes or walkers for walking and balancing and view them as tools to help you do things and not as signs of weakness
- Suggestions to make your home safer:
 - Improve the lighting in your home
 - Remove things you can trip over from stairs and places where you walk
 - Have handrails installed and adequate lighting on all staircases
 - Remove throw rugs or use double-sided tape to keep rugs from slipping
 - Use non-slip mats in the bathtub and on the shower floor
 - Have grab bars installed next to your toilet and in the tub or shower
 - Be mindful around pets if they like to keep close to your feet as they can cause you to trip
 - Keep paths and the driveway clear of snow and ice in the winter

Physiotherapists are university educated health care professionals who work to enhance and maintain a person's desired level of physical activity for independent living and participation in desired activities. Find a physiotherapist at www.phyiotherapy.ca.