

FALLS PREVENTION

Understanding and reducing the risks of falling

Understanding falls

There are many reasons why people fall, but falls and fall related injuries tend to become more common as people get older. Yet, it is important to understand that falls are not a normal part of ageing. Falls and their related injuries can greatly impact one's ability to carry out everyday tasks and affect overall quality of life.

The positive aspect of this widespread health challenge is that falls can be prevented. The underlying causes of falls are diverse, but by identifying and addressing these individual risk factors, we can reduce the falls risk and even prevent people from falling.

So if you have noticed that you have become more unsteady or cautious, lost confidence in your walking, or suffered a fall, then it is crucial to take a moment to reflect on the contributing factors. Understanding the circumstances is vital, as one fall even if it didn't necessarily result in an injury, or even just an increase in cautiousness significantly increases the likelihood of future falls.

Risk factors behind falls and falls risk assessment

Falls are often multi-factorial, which means there are several changes that might have occurred in our physical ability, progressions in health conditions and medication, the environment around us, and even our emotional or mental state.

Factors contributing to falls may be related to aspects within an individual, such as

- Internal factors, e.g. age or various health conditions such as light-headedness when getting up, after standing up, after sitting or lying down, visual impairments, reduced strength, pain.
- External factors e.g. medications or slippery footwear, trip hazards, nutritional intake.
- Behaviours, e.g. rushing.

Some of these risk factors cannot be changed, however, most risk factors that contribute to falls can be influenced. This is why it is important first to identify and then manage these individual-specific risk factors. The cornerstones of falls prevention are maintaining overall health, managing existing medical conditions, and preserving mobility.

Losing confidence

If you have experienced a fall or have difficulties with your balance or walking ability you may have noticed a loss of confidence. This can sometimes lead to a fear of falling. This lack of confidence and fear of falling may sometimes even limit and hinder physical and social activities. This avoidance can have adverse effects on your mobility, walking ability, and ultimately overall functional capacity and independence (image 1).

Consider starting regular balance and strength training exercises to help you to stay on your feet, if you have difficulties in;

- balance
- rising from a chair
- climbing stairs
- lowering yourself to the floor unaided
- getting up from the floor unaided
- maintaining your walking speed

If a fear of falling is concerning you or limiting your daily activities and quality of life, don't hesitate to reach out to your healthcare provider for a falls risk assessment.

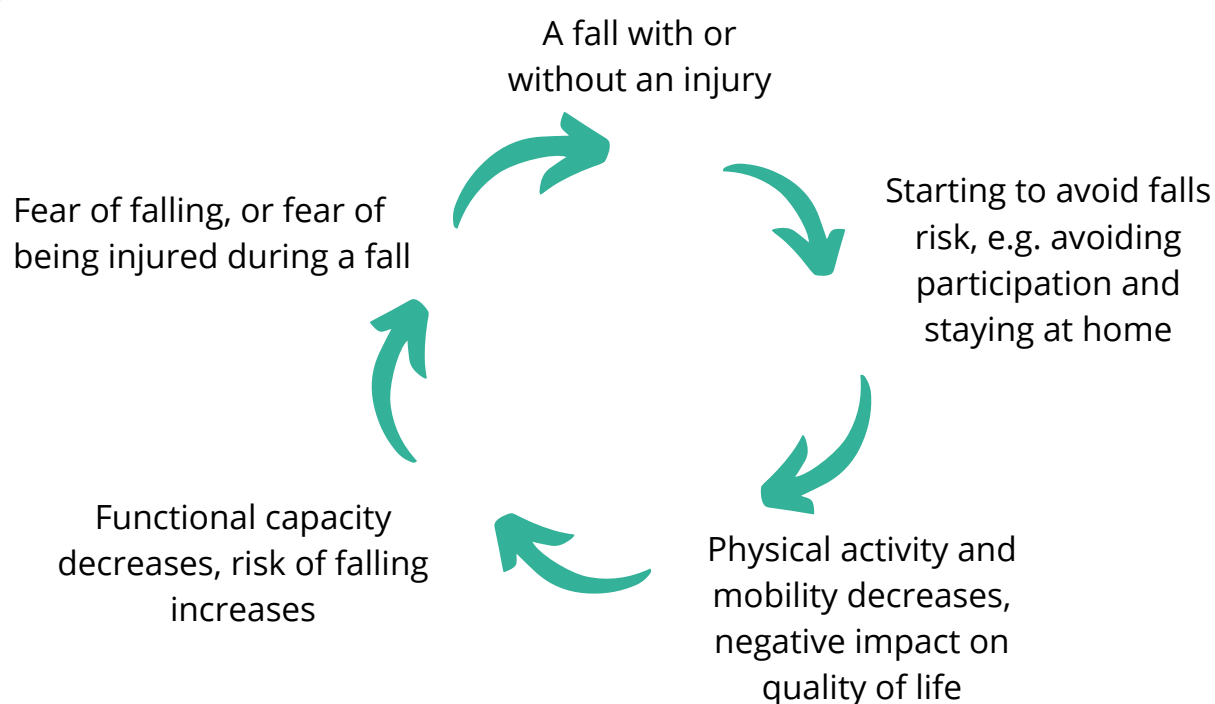


Image 1. The vicious cycle of fear of falling

Five tips to prevent falls

1. Manage your physical activity

Stay active to boost your strength, balance, and mobility to reduce your risk of falling. Aim for regular balance and strength exercises at least 3 days a week and gradually increase the intensity of the exercises. Everyday activities like walking and household chores also contribute to your mobility, independence and functional capacity. You can easily tie simple exercises into your daily routine, for example, whilst watching TV, making breakfast, or brushing your teeth.

2. Safety in your home environment

Make sure that your home environment is safe. Remove unnecessary obstacles such as rugs and ensure floors are not slippery. Adequate, easy-to-access lighting is important, especially at night.

Consider reorganising furniture to allow for space and wider, clear walkways. Install handrails in bathrooms and hallways for added support and safety. Don't be afraid to use a walking aid if necessary.

Pay attention to your footwear. Ensure it fits well, is easy to fasten, and has low heels with non-slip soles. Avoid rushing and don't forget to use shoe grips during winter time, if needed.

3. Healthy eating and drinking

Good nutrition and diet supports your health, helps maintain blood pressure, sugar levels and prevents you from tiredness and keeps you strong, steady and balanced state. Have at least three meals a day and drink 1–1.5 litres of fluids. Be cautious with alcohol, as it can affect your balance, especially with certain medications.

A balanced diet with sufficient intake of vitamin D helps maintain healthy weight as well as bone and muscle strength, reducing the risk of falls and minimising injuries resulting from possible falls.

4. Take care of your overall well-being

Taking care of your health allows you to prevent illnesses, manage chronic health problems such as diabetes and high blood pressure, or slow down the progression of diseases such as joint degeneration, memory impairments and dementia. Maintaining overall health and managing existing long-term health conditions also reduces your risk of falling and falls-related injuries.

It is also important to have your vision and hearing regularly checked. By using glasses and treating eye conditions as well as using hearing aids, you can compensate for potential vision or hearing impairments and thereby reduce your falls risk.

5. Check your medication

Certain medications can increase your falls risk, as they may cause side effects such as dizziness, fatigue, or difficulty maintaining balance. Using multiple medications at the same time can also increase this risk.

A useful tip is to talk to your doctor every year about your need for, and dosage of, your medications. This can help to avoid unnecessary side effects that might increase your falls risk. Remember though, it's never a good idea to stop any medication on your own. Always consult your doctor if you experience any adverse effects.

Remember, falls are not a natural part of ageing, and preventing them is possible. Believe in yourself and start taking steps today to maintain your balance, stability and independence!

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