

Health

Falls risk checklist

Are you at risk of falling?

Complete this checklist and if you answer yes to one or more questions speak to your GP so they can help you reduce your risk.

- Do you do less than 30 minutes of physical activity per day?
- Do you sometimes feel lightheaded, dizzy or unsteady?
- Are your shoes slippery, ill fitting or unsupportive?
- Have you recently lost weight or do you have poor appetite?
- If you've lost weight are your clothes getting looser so your trousers are too long?
- Does your home have loose floor mats, slippery floors or furniture which makes it hard to move around easily?
- Has it been more than 12 months since you had your eyes tested?
- Has it been more than 12 months since your doctor reviewed your medications?



Q&A FALLS

Q: What is a fall?

A: Most of us would describe a fall as a major incident. One where we've come down rapidly on the ground, without control, and hurt ourselves. However, according to the World Health Organisation, the definition of a fall is "inadvertently coming to rest on the ground, floor or lower level" so it's much broader. Falls can result from a slip or trip, may occur from low heights such as steps, stairs and curbs and may not necessarily involve the whole body resting on the ground or even any obvious injuries.

Q: Should I tell my GP if I've had a fall?

A: Older people in particular should discuss all falls, even the ones that do not result in injury with their GP. Often people don't identify what's happened to them as a fall, or if they do they don't see it as particularly serious, but a fall can be a sign that something else is going on. Your GP can only help if they know about it.

Q: Where do most falls happen?

A: Surprisingly, most falls happen at home. It's where we spend the most time and our homes can be full of obstacles. When the team at Castlemaine Health conduct a home assessment they look at:

Access including steps and paths
Hazards including floor coverings, mats, clutter and cords
Bathrooms and bedrooms to see if rails or other aids are needed
Seating
Kitchens including access to frequently used items.

Let's reduce the risk of falls

April is falls awareness month across Australia, kicking off each year with April Falls Day, a national program that aims to promote awareness and reduce the incidence of falls.

Falls are a major health issue. According to the World Health Organisation, they are the second leading cause of accidental or unintentional injury deaths worldwide.

The Falls Prevention Society Australia and New Zealand estimates that about 30 per cent of adults over 65 experience at least one fall per year and as the population ages, this figure is set to increase.

While the most common injuries resulting from a fall are superficial cuts, abrasions, bruises and sprains, they can also result in more serious injuries including fractures and head injuries; the most serious and costly being a fracture of the hip. Elderly people recover slowly from hip fractures and complications are common after surgery and during recovery.

Wendy Cumming, physiotherapist and coordinator of the Falls and Balance Program at Castlemaine Health, says that people often don't understand the impact a fall can have.

"Falls can be devastating, particularly for older people," Wendy says.

"The injuries can be difficult to recover from but even if the physical effect of the fall isn't serious it can really knock a person's confidence. After a fall an older person will often become much more cautious, reducing their activity level, or even stopping going out and doing things at all."

"Fear of falling is actually a major risk factor. The more a person withdraws and limits activity, the more likely they are to end up having another fall."

The great news is that falls are generally preventable. The first step is talking about them.

According to Wendy, many older people don't tell anyone about a fall unless they've received an obvious injury that needs attention.

"It's important to remember that a fall can be an indicator that something is changing in a person's health," she says. "And that really should be checked out by their doctor."

"Two or more falls in a year would say to us that there's some kind of underlying problem."

There could be any number of reasons behind a fall. It could be an issue with mobility, strength or balance; it could be blood pressure, or blood sugars if a person is diabetic, an eye condition like cataracts that needs to be addressed or side effects of medications.

It could also be that it's time to review a person's home environment, see if they need an aid or even look at something as simple as footwear.

The team at Castlemaine Health can work with GPs to assess a person's ability and develop an individual program drawing on the resources of the whole allied health team.

"A multi-disciplinary approach has been found to be the most effective at reducing the incidence of falls," Wendy says.

"We have dietitians who can talk nutrition for good muscle strength. If people have soreness or problems with sensation in their feet they can speak with a podiatrist. Our pharmacists can assess and explain medication and there are occupational therapists to help with issues like sleep and relaxation; essential for our body to function well and harder to get enough of as we age."

Wendy says that people often don't think of seeing someone in her field in a preventative capacity but that it's actually much better to see a physiotherapist when you are at a high risk of injury than once an injury has occurred and you need help with recovery.

"We can assess a person's strength, flexibility and range of movement. I do a battery of balance tests and develop a specific program of exercises for each patient."

"Most of the research that is coming out now is focused on the importance of incorporating balance challenging activities into any exercise program."



Wendy Cumming, physiotherapist and coordinator of the Falls and Balance Program at Castlemaine Health.

Wendy has been instrumental in developing the Better Balance Program at Castlemaine Health, a six-week program consisting of weekly two-hour group sessions made up of a one-hour exercise class and one-hour education class.

"The Better Balance Program has been extremely successful," Wendy says. "We see great improvement in the people who attend. In fact, recent reviews show that clients experienced 50 per cent fewer falls in the six months after completing the program compared to the six months preceding it."

If you or someone you know has experienced a fall or is at risk of a fall speak to your GP who will be able to provide a referral to the Falls and Balance Program.

For information and referrals contact:
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Send us your questions or tips about health and wellbeing

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