

Older Adult Fall Prevention in Wisconsin

What causes falls in older adults?

Many factors contribute to falls, including individual and environmental factors. Some of these factors can be modified. Understanding this allows us to change the individual and environmental factors that increase an older adult's risk of a fall.

Falls are preventable. Recent studies have shown that falls prevention programs can decrease the rate of falls by up to one-half. Wisconsin researchers, and others across the U.S. and world, have identified multiple approaches that work to reduce falls such as: strength and balance exercise, medication assessment and management, vision correction, and home and environmental modifications. Community public health and social service programs, in combination with preventive practices in health care settings reduce the likelihood of falls and support older persons in maintaining their health and staying safe.

What is the burden of older adult falls in Wisconsin?

- ✓ Wisconsin has one of the highest rates of fall-related deaths and hospitalizations in the nation. It consistently ranks in the top three in the nation.
- ✓ Falls are the leading cause of injury-related deaths, emergency department visits, and hospitalizations among older adults.
- ✓ Wisconsin residents 65 years of age and older had over 25,000 visits to emergency departments and over 16,000 inpatient hospitalizations in 2006 due to falls.
- ✓ Emergency department visits and hospitalizations resulted in over \$350 million in charges. Approximately \$330 million of these charges were paid by Medicare.
- ✓ Most (57%) Wisconsin residents aged 65 years and older who were hospitalized in 2006 due to a fall were discharged to a skilled nursing or intermediate care facility.

How is Wisconsin working to address this problem?

Wisconsin has become a national leader in research and implementation of prevention strategies to reduce the number of older adult falls, injuries, and deaths. **Collaboration** and the **formation of partnerships** have been essential to these activities. They include:

- ✓ "Facilitating Dissemination of Injury Interventions: A Randomized Trial" is a five-year, CDC-funded research study within the **Injury Research Center at the Medical College of Wisconsin** that will assess whether the use of a "facilitative system" can successfully bridge the gap between injury prevention and control research and the implementation of evidence-driven, community-based programs, policies, and practices. Partners from the **University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute**, the **Wisconsin Department of Health Services**, and **local public health and aging departments** are essential to implementing this project.
- ✓ "Dissemination Research on Fall Prevention: Stepping On in a U.S. Community Setting," is a four-year collaborative project led by the **University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health** and the **Injury Research Center at the Medical College of Wisconsin**, in partnership with the **Wisconsin Department of Health Services**. This CDC-funded project will translate an effective fall prevention intervention that was developed and tested in Australia into a U.S. community program which can be used nationwide.
- ✓ "Empowering Older People to Take More Control of Their Health," a grant from the Administration on Aging, involves implementation of the community-based fall prevention program, Stepping On. Partners on this grant include the **Wisconsin Department of Health Services**, the **University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health**, and **local aging offices and public health departments** across the state.

✓“Research Study to Assess Multi-faceted Fall Prevention Intervention Strategies Among Community-dwelling Older Adults” was a three-year CDC-funded project conducted in partnership with the **University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health** and the **Wisconsin Department of Health Services**.

✓“Northwest Wisconsin Falls Prevention Collaborative,” a one-year development award funded in 2005, established a system for screening elderly Barron County residents, either in the community or in residents’ homes, to assess risk factors for falls. The project built capacity and strengthened systems by fostering the relationship between **Lakeview Medical Center, Barron County Office on Aging**, and the **Injury Research Center at the Medical College of Wisconsin**, as well as drawing on the resources available from **Interfaith Volunteer Services of Barron County, Inc.** and **Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College**.

✓Development of the Sure Step program by a geriatrician and physical therapist from **University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health and UW Hospital and Clinics**, in collaboration with the **Kenosha County Aging and Disability Resource Center**. This program targets older adults who have combined problems of falls and cognitive impairment and their caregivers.

✓Statewide communication with local partners working in older adult fall prevention through the **Falls Prevention Initiative**. This group meets quarterly via teleconference to provide a forum to discuss new prevention programs and activities across the state.

✓Additional projects around the state have included a \$25,000 grant to **Brown, Door, Kewaunee, Oconto, and Outagamie** Counties to develop the “Northeastern Wisconsin Falls Prevention Coalition” and a \$25,000 grant to **Assisted Living Foundation of Wisconsin** to support fall prevention training for assisted living caregivers.

What are the next steps to address this problem?

More work needs to be done to address this problem. This includes supporting organizations across the state to implement strategies we already know work, and partnering with research organizations to better understand why falls occur so frequently in Wisconsin’s older adults and the strategies to best address the problem. Future steps include:

- ✓ Providing technical assistance and training to local public health and aging offices to offer community-based fall assessments and prevention services to older adults in their area.
- ✓ Changing the perception that falls are a part of getting older and cannot be prevented. Strategies to address this perception include conference presentations, media campaigns, and work with individual organizations.
- ✓ Encouraging medical professionals to include discussions about fear of falling and prevention of falls with their older adult patients and to implement appropriate care plans after an emergency department visit or hospitalization due to a fall. This includes following guidelines from the American Geriatrics Society.
- ✓ Reimbursing fall prevention activities and programs from insurance companies, including Medicare.
- ✓ Forming a commission to focus on older adult fall prevention. This commission will position Wisconsin to receive additional resources to implement best practice prevention strategies.

For more information

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Injury Prevention Program: www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/health/InjuryPrevention/FallPrevention/falls.htm
Injury Research Center at the Medical College of Wisconsin: www.mcw.edu/jrc