

# FALLS PREVENTION

INSIGHTS FROM THE NORTHEAST



# Table of contents

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- Introduction.....4
- Focus group background.....5
- Focus groups: What we heard.....6
  - Falls are common among participants.....6
  - Community programs and resources.....7
  - Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic.....8
  - Winter climate.....8
  - Physical activity.....9
  - Home assesment and modification.....10
  - Communications channels.....10
  - Transportation.....11
  - Ideas for the future.....11
- Municipalities and Community Plans.....12
- Learn more about falls prevention.....13
- Acknowledgements.....14
  - Appendix A: Focus groups community highlights.....16
    - Chetwynd.....17
    - Dawson Creek.....18
    - Fort Nelson.....19
    - Hudson’s Hope.....20

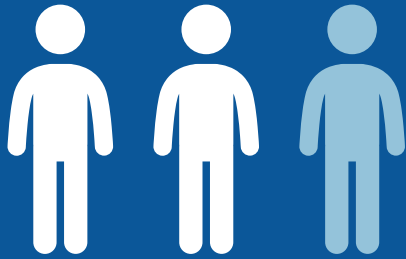


**In the Northeast,  
seniors' centers  
are the hub for  
community events  
and programs.**



# Introduction

Falls represent a significant burden of injury across British Columbia (BC) and within Northern Health (NH) and have a substantial impact on the lives of those who fall.



**One in three adults over the age of 65 fall each year in BC.<sup>i</sup>**

## Falls represent the number one cause of injury-related hospitalizations in NH

Between 2002 and 2019, the total falls related hospitalizations in NH for older adults (65+ years) was 10,966 (with a rate of 1,937.9 per 100,000). For the same period, the estimated cost of hospitalizations due to falls in NH was \$173 million (approximately \$9.6 million per year) and resulted in a total length of stay in hospital of 181,809 days.<sup>ii</sup>

The NH Injury Prevention team created the Falls Prevention project with grant funding from the Pacific Public Health Foundation. The goal of the project is to learn about the experience of falls in Northern communities and the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on prevention efforts. To learn from the community, the Public Health team conducted a series of focus groups.

Fifteen focus groups were conducted across the Northern Health region. This report will share the findings from the four focus group sessions in the [Northeast](#) (NE).

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<sup>i</sup> Seniors' Fall Prevention. Government of British Columbia. (n.d.). Retrieved from: [www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/managing-your-health/injury-prevention/seniors-fall-prevention](http://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/managing-your-health/injury-prevention/seniors-fall-prevention)

<sup>ii</sup> BCIRPU Injury Data Online Tool, 2024. Discharge Abstract Database (DAD), 2002-2019 (combined). Ministry of Health.

# Focus groups background

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Starting in the autumn of 2023, a series of focus groups were conducted in communities located in the Northeast. Each of the four communities visited were situated across the traditional and unceded territories of the Sekani, Cree, Beaver and Dene people, Treaty 8 First Nations, Dane-Zaa people and Prophet River First Nations. The communities are colonially known as Dawson Creek, Chetwynd, Hudson's Hope, and Fort Nelson (Northern Rockies Regional Municipality).

The communities visited ranged in population from approximately 840 to 12,000. Communities were selected based on a series of criteria which included an assessment of the population demographics, the location in the health authority, the healthcare resources in community and the community engagement in projects that support healthy aging.

Participants were invited to the focus groups in a variety of ways. NH Communications posted promotions on social media and on the NH webpage. Community partners put up posters and shared with their networks. The focus groups ranged from two to 31 participants.

The focus groups included adults aged 65+ along with interested community members who were invited to share the following:

- What people are currently doing to prevent a fall.
- What resources are available to help prevent falls.
- The unique ways falls are prevented in community.
- How the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted falls prevention efforts.

# Focus groups: What we heard

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This report outlines the themes identified in the focus group sessions related to falls prevention and healthy aging. This summary is intended to serve as a snapshot of what was shared in the discussion and may not reflect all opinions of community members or the full range of community resources available.

From the focus group sessions, the following themes emerged:

- Falls were common among participants.
- Community programs that support healthy aging have significant strengths and unique challenges.
- The COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on healthy aging efforts.
- Winter climate increases the risk of falls.
- Older adults in Northern Health enjoy a wide variety of physical activities.
- Home assessments and modifications to prevent falls were common.
- Transportation is a challenge for older adults to maintain wellness and some communities have found innovative solutions.
- Communication channels are often unique to the community.
- Community members have creative ideas to improve healthy aging supports in the future.

## Falls are common among participants

Many focus group participants shared their experience of having a fall. Many stories included falls within the home or in community spaces. Common contributors to a fall included:

- Ice
- Slips and trips in the home
- Falls down stairs
- Physical conditions such as dizziness
- Pets tripping or pulling their owner

## Community programs and resources

Community organizations can contribute to healthy aging and falls prevention through the delivery of programs and services. Group physical activity classes create an opportunity for falls prevention through strength and balance exercise along with the time to socialize and build friendships.

In the Northeast communities, the seniors' centers are the hub for community events and programs. Seniors' centres host activities such as crib tournaments, line dancing, tap dancing, potlucks, and routine luncheons. While seniors' centres provide many activities, attracting volunteers to facilitate the events is challenging.

Alongside the seniors' centres, recreation centres, indoor walking tracks and community pools offer places where older adults can gather and exercise.

Community programs that support healthy aging are very popular among older adults. Services provided by Better at Home, Meals on Wheels and the Community Paramedic program are identified as valuable to healthy aging and falls prevention.





In the community, improvements to infrastructure such as sidewalks and street lighting encourages older adults to use active transportation and assists in preventing falls. While improvements to sidewalks are being made by local governments, focus group participants noted that ill-maintained sidewalks or the absence of a sidewalk in a neighborhood creates a risk of falls.

### **Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Older adults reported that participation in group activities declined notably during the pandemic and continues to the present. In addition to lower participation, there are fewer volunteers coordinating community events. Focus group participants, who are also community organizers, noted it is more difficult to start new programs and community members are often reluctant to join. Many programs have not re-started since the pandemic. Some older adults reported an increase in alcohol consumption during the pandemic.

### **Winter climate**

Winter conditions present a significant risk of falls for older adults. While many local governments were praised for their snow clearing practices, ice buildup was a common concern.







## Physical activity

Physical activity is important for healthy aging. Strength and balance exercises help prevent falls. Older adults shared the many outdoor physical activities they routinely enjoy, such as skiing, walking on trails, running outdoors, and swimming in the local pool.

Indoor activities were popular with focus group participants. Activities such as curling, walking on the indoor track, aquafit, Tai Chi, pickleball, and group exercise classes were commonly enjoyed.

When asked if they would participate in an online exercise class, the Hudson's Hope group said they would if it was screened in a group setting and there was a coordinator to facilitate it. Other focus groups had many participants said they would not engage in online exercise classes.

## Home assessment and modification

Home assessments and modifications create a safe environment that prevents falls. Examples of home modifications include fixing broken stairs, securing handrails, and installing grab bars in a bathroom.

Older adults in the Northeast focus groups shared the assessments done in their homes and the enhancements they made to prevent a fall. Improvements such as removing throw rugs and adding grab bars in the bathroom were common. Participants shared it is difficult to find skilled people in the community to do the modifications.

## Communication channels

NH is interested in learning more about communication channels to promote community events and how older adults would like to receive health information.

Seniors' centres are a common place older adults go to learn about community events. Participants preferred to get information in person but would also use Facebook as a resource. Some communities have a bulletin board and an email list for newsletters to share events or programs with their members.



## Transportation

Access to healthcare and community services is important for healthy aging and can have an impact on fall risks. Older adults reported challenges with regional transportation. They shared they often travel to larger communities to access healthcare services. Participants noted in some instances older adults were moving away from the community to be closer to more healthcare resources. Older adults in the Northeast used transportation provided through the [Northern Health Connections Bus](#), Hope Air, Medical Assistance Program, and community shuttles to travel.

## Ideas for the future

The Northeast communities have many ideas that could support healthy aging and falls prevention in the future. Some of those ideas include:

- More benches along walking paths.
- A community handyman to do home repairs and modifications.
- Improved grant funding for home modifications.
- Further support to complete a home safety checklist.
- A system for daily check-in for older adults living alone.
- Free senior-focused exercise classes.



# Municipalities and Community Plans

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Municipalities work hard to support their community members. Often falls prevention and healthy aging goals align well with age-friendly initiatives, healthy aging strategies, active transportation plans and general community goals. Visit the municipal websites to learn more about each community.

- [City of Dawson Creek](#)
- [District of Chetwynd](#)
- [District of Hudson's Hope](#)
- [Northern Rockies Regional Municipality](#)





# Learn more about falls prevention

Adults 65+ can reduce the risk of a fall by doing the following activities.<sup>iii</sup>

- Talk to your doctor/ primary care provider about falls.
- Talk to your pharmacist or doctor/primary care provider about medications that may increase the risk of a fall.
- Complete a [home safety checklist](#) to make your home safer.
- Engage in strength and balance exercises (or activities that improve your strength and balance). Aim to accumulate 150 minutes or more of activity per week.
- Talk to your doctor/primary care provider about steps you can take to maintain good health such as visiting your optometrist and managing any chronic conditions.

To learn more about falls prevention in community and for funding opportunities that support healthy aging, scan the QR code below or visit the [NH Injury prevention webpage](#).



<sup>iii</sup> Fall Prevention: Risk Assessment and Management for Community Dwelling Older adults. Retrieved from [www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/practitioner-professional-resources/bc-guidelines/fall-prevention](http://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/practitioner-professional-resources/bc-guidelines/fall-prevention)

# Acknowledgements

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Northern Health would like to thank all the focus group participants for sharing their experiences, opinions, ideas, and expertise. We are also grateful to the community organizations, leaders and staff who supported the focus group planning.

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Page 3 photo: Hudson's Hope Seniors Club.

Page 7 photo: Northern Lamplighter accessible ramp.



# Appendix



# Appendix A: Focus group community highlights

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The Population and Public Health (PPH) team partnered with community organizations to host a series of focus groups in seniors' centers, recreation centers and community halls. Community members and older adults 65+ were invited to participate through a variety of ways including invitations from community partners, community email newsletter, Facebook promotions, bulletin board posters and personal invites.

Focus group discussions were facilitated by the PPH team in either one large group or through dividing the participants into smaller group conversations. Key points were recorded and later themed for this report.

The focus groups in the Northeast ranged from 2 to 31 participants. Facilitated discussions invited people to share the following:

- What people are currently doing to prevent a fall.
- What resources are available to help prevent falls.
- The unique ways falls are prevented in community.
- How the COVID-19 pandemic impacted falls prevention efforts.

While this full report reflects the information shared in all focus groups, below are the community-specific highlights related to healthy aging. The details outlined from each community are intended to reflect key points of discussion shared in each session.



# CHETWYND

Date of focus group: September 20, 2023

## What we heard

### What are the healthy aging supports?

- Meals on Wheels is widely used.
- An Optometrist provides clinics in the community monthly.
- A quilters guild meets to work together and provides an opportunity to socialize.
- Sidewalk repairs are complete in some areas and new lampposts have been installed.
- The recreation center has an indoor walking track and aquafit classes to support physical activity.

### What are the healthy aging challenges?

- The lack of sidewalks in some areas deterred people from walking in the community.
- Some older adults moved to be closer to a wide range of healthcare supports.
- Some community programs stopped for the pandemic and have not re-started.

## DAWSON CREEK

Date of focus group: September 19, 2023

### What we heard

#### What are the healthy aging supports?

- The seniors' center hosts many low-cost activities such as a guitar club, exercise classes, and Tai Chi.
- The seniors' center has wheelchairs available for loan.
- Dawson Creek has an outdoor gym that is well used by older adults.
- Tennis, pickleball and badminton are all available in the community.
- Community businesses raised funds to maintain the seniors center through the COVID-19 closures.

#### What are the healthy aging challenges?

- Focus group participants note that it is a challenge to get men to participate in programs.
- Participants sometimes travel to other communities for healthcare services.
- Sidewalks in disrepair are identified as a risk for falls
- More volunteers are needed to support programs for older adults.

## **FORT NELSON**

Date of focus group: September 26, 2023

### **What we heard**

#### **What are the healthy aging supports?**

- A community shuttle is available for local travel.
- The Lamplighters Activity Center hosts many programs that older adults enjoy, including card games, knitting groups, and luncheons.
- The Northern Rockies Regional Municipality received praise for their routine snow clearing.
- Programs such as The Community Paramedic program, Better at Home and the Friendship Center provide programs and services to support healthy aging.
- The Red Cross has a loan cupboard for mobility aids and equipment.
- Sidewalk repairs are recently done in the community which will prevent falls.

#### **What are the healthy aging challenges?**

- A skilled person available to hire is needed to complete home modifications.
- Recruiting volunteers to support community programs is a challenge.
- Older adults expressed the need for increased support in the home to age in place.

## HUDSON'S HOPE

Date of focus group: September 21, 2023

### What we heard

#### What are the healthy aging supports?

- A bus transports people to Fort St. John or Chetwynd to attend appointments and to get goods and services in those communities.
- The monthly potluck at the seniors' center is well attended and provides an opportunity to socialize.
- The District of Hudson's Hope received praise for their routine snow clearing.
- Older adults are thankful to have family doctors living in their community.
- The community has an email newsletter to promote events or programs.

#### What are the healthy aging challenges?

- Many older adults left the community in recent years.
- Recruiting volunteers for community programs is a challenge.
- Some sidewalks in the community need repair.
- The gravel used on the ice in the winter poses a falls risk when the ice has melted in the spring.
- Since the pandemic, many programs stopped and have not re-started. The weekly meal program was particularly missed.





# northern health

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