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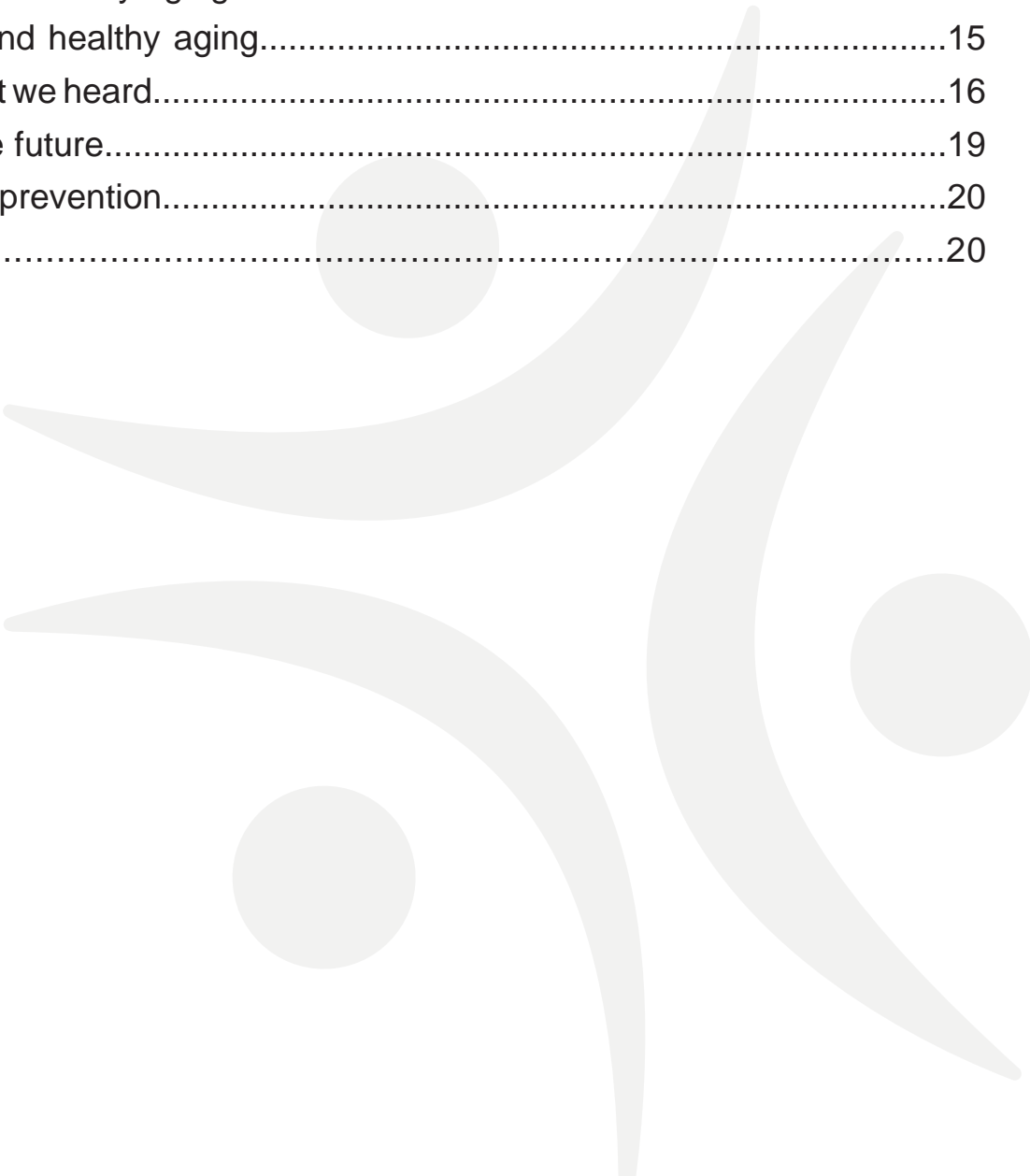
FALLS PREVENTION

IN NORTHERN BC



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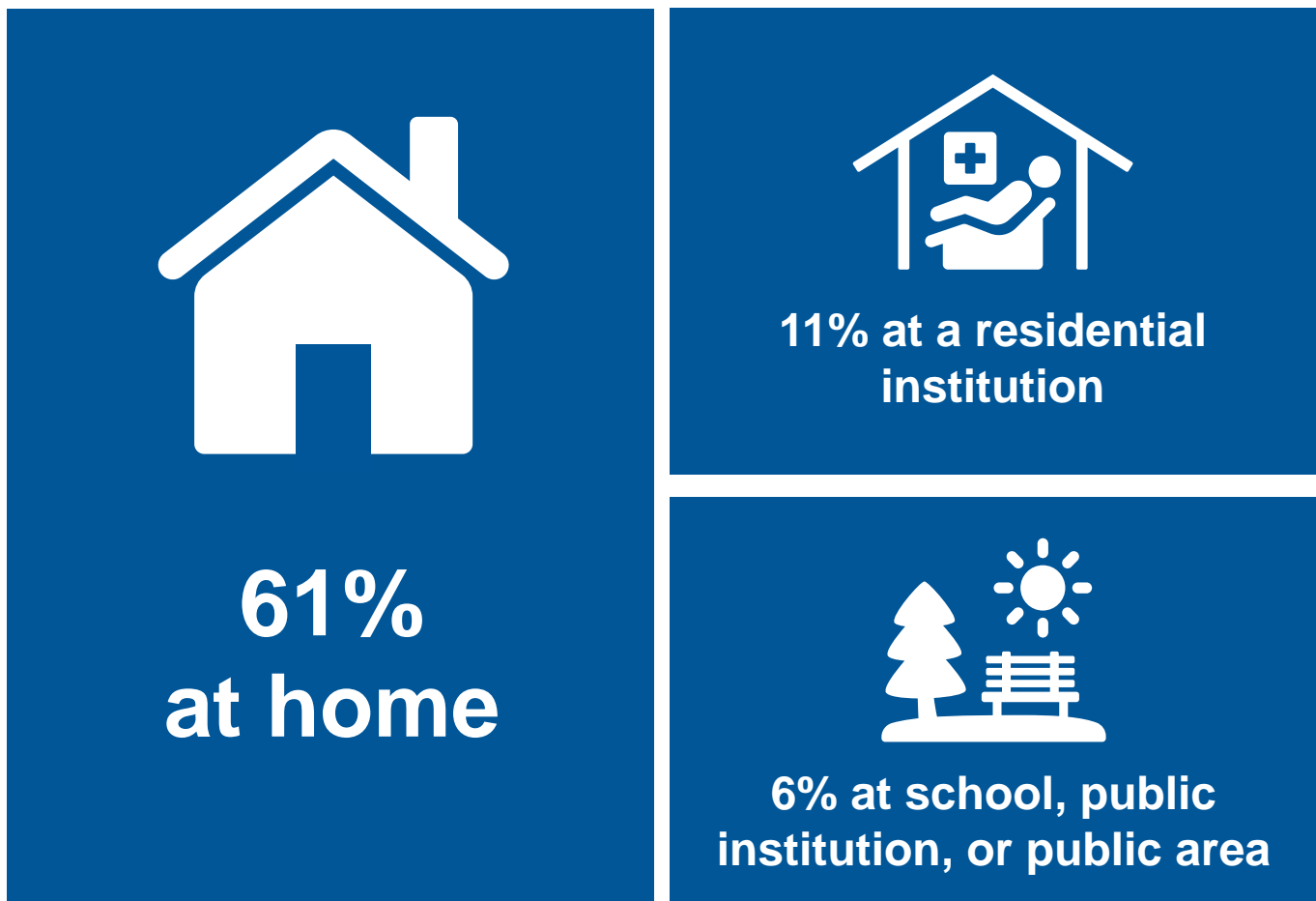


Falls are a leading cause of injury across British Columbia

Introduction

Preventing a fall is an important part of healthy aging. Falls are a leading cause of injury across British Columbia (BC). One in three adults over 65 falls each year.ⁱ They represent the number one cause of injury-related hospitalizations in the Northern Health (NH) region. NH spends approximately \$9.6 million per year to care for those who have been injured due to a fall. Fortunately, there are many ways a fall can be prevented at the individual and community level.

Common locations of fallsⁱⁱ



ⁱSeniors' Fall Prevention. Government of British Columbia. (n.d.). Retrieved from: gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/managing-your-health/injury-prevention/seniors-fall-prevention

ⁱⁱBCIRPU Injury Data Online Tool, 2024. Discharge Abstract Database (DAD), 2002-2019 (combined). Ministry of Health.

The NH Public Health Injury Prevention team received a grant from the Pacific Public Health Foundation to support a falls prevention project. It involved conducting a telephone survey and series of focus groups to learn about falls prevention efforts and to understand what impact, if any, the COVID-19 pandemic had on those efforts across the North.

A group of Public Health team members conducted a series of 15 focus groups across the NH region from April to October 2023. The telephone survey was completed in October and November 2023.

Common causes of a fall



56%
slip, trip,
stumble from
the same level



8%
steps / stairs



7%
furniture

How we connected with older adults in community

A series of focus groups and a telephone survey were used to connect directly with adults 65 years and older. Communities were selected to host a focus group by using a set of criteria including an assessment of the population demographics, the location in the health authority, the health care resources in community, and the community engagement in projects that support healthy aging.

Older adults and those who support them were invited to participate in the focus group sessions through NH communications and local communication channels such as newsletters and posters.



Fifteen focus groups were conducted in communities in the Northwest, Northeast and Northern Interior regions. The communities visited included:

Northern Interior:

- Granisle
- Prince George
- Quesnel
- Mackenzie
- Valemount
- Lake Babine Nation - Tachet

Northwest:

- Houston
- Terrace
- Stewart
- Prince Rupert
- Metlakatla

Northeast:

- Dawson Creek
- Chetwynd
- Hudson's Hope
- Fort Nelson

The focus groups ranged in size from 2 to 33 participants.

The focus groups were asked:

- What people are currently doing to prevent a fall?
- What resources are available to help prevent falls?
- How is falls prevention being supported in community?
- Has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted falls prevention efforts?

The second method to connect with older adults was a telephone survey. The telephone survey spoke with 301 older adults to learn:

- What was their experience with falls?
- What measures had they taken to prevent a fall?
- What physical activities did they engage in which support overall health and contribute to falls prevention?
- Did the COVID-19 pandemic have an impact on their falls risk?

Focus groups: What we heard

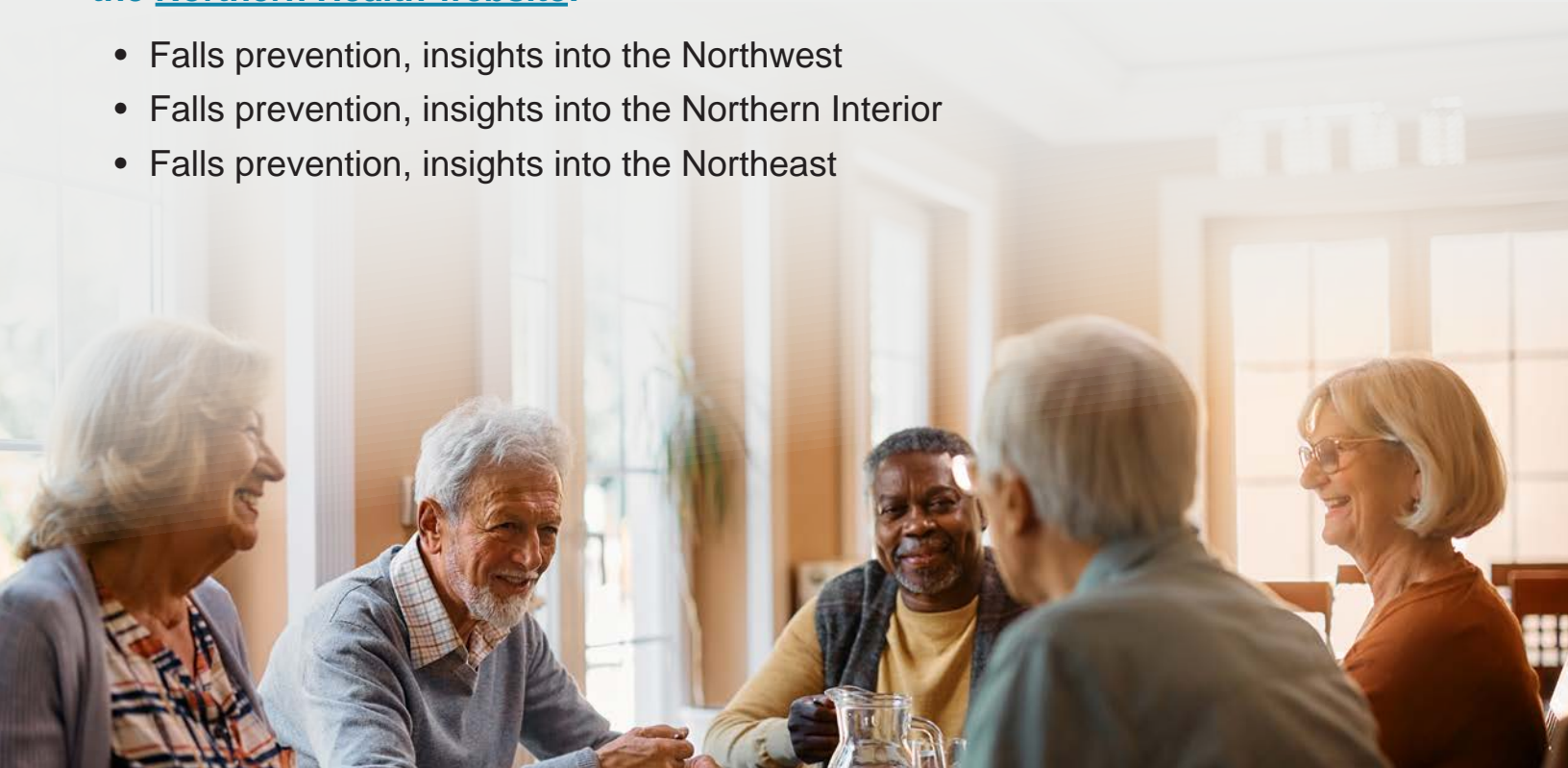
The NH Public Health team learned about the experience of older adults in community through the lens of falls prevention and healthy aging at each focus group. Each of the communities visited expressed interest in healthy aging efforts including preventing falls. Participants in the focus groups were proud to share insights into their communities and the ways in which community members and programs can assist in healthy aging.

The focus group discussions showed that:

- Falls are common among participants.
- Community programs play an important role in supporting healthy aging.
- Healthy built environments can reduce the risk of a fall.
- Communities work together to support healthy aging.
- The COVID-19 pandemic impacted healthy aging efforts significantly.

For the detailed reports for communities in each of the three NH Health Service Delivery Areas, please refer to the following reports posted on the [Northern Health website](#):

- Falls prevention, insights into the Northwest
- Falls prevention, insights into the Northern Interior
- Falls prevention, insights into the Northeast



Falls are common among participants

Participants shared their experiences of falls in the home, in their yards, and in the community.

Some falls resulted in an injury while others did not. Discussions highlighted that the fear of being injured by a fall is common. One participant stated, “I am deathly afraid of falling.”

The fear of being injured by a fall motivated some individuals to take measures to prevent future falls such as participating in physical activities, modifying their homes, using mobility aids, and wearing medical alert buttons. Some individuals also changed their daily routines to avoid leaving their home during the winter or in icy conditions.



One participant shared:

**I hesitate
to go out in
the winter
because of
the snow.**





Community organizations and programs play an important part in healthy aging and preventing falls

Healthy aging: Community programs

Focus group participants identified that community organizations and programs play an important part in healthy aging and preventing falls. Seniors' centers and recreation centers are often the hub of the community for older adults. These spaces are used to socialize, gather for meals, and participate in programming. Programs highlighted as valuable include those that deliver care, provide meals, create opportunities to gather, organize physical activities and support people to maintain their health and live independently. Some organizations also offer strength and balance exercise classes which are proven to directly help prevent a fall.

In communities where seniors' programs or services have been recently reduced or cancelled due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic or for other reasons, the absence was noted by participants and is viewed as a loss.

Local access to a pharmacist, doctor, optometrist, physiotherapist, community paramedic, and an occupational therapist were reported as supportive to falls prevention efforts. Travel to other communities is necessary for some, as services are not available locally. Lack of access to health care services was identified as a challenge to healthy aging and falls prevention efforts.

Falls prevention: Our environment and preventing falls

BC Healthy Communities defines healthy built environment as “The human-made, physical characteristics that provide the setting for human activities – where people live, work, learn, and play. Healthy built environments are the product of good planning practices. Whether rural, urban, or suburban communities, healthy built environments are places that are designed to support good health for all.”ⁱⁱⁱ



Using healthy built environment principles in the home and the community can reduce the risk of a fall. Many participants reported wanting to remain in their current homes as they get older. When discussing their risk of falling in the home, many focus group participants reported modifying their homes to make them safer. Installation of grab bars in the bathroom, handrails on stairs, and removing area rugs are common home modifications that people make. Others expressed difficulty in identifying what needed to be done, finding a contractor to make the modifications, and obtaining the resources (e.g., materials and funding) to make improvements. There are some examples across the Northern region of housing built specifically to support older adults to age in place. These senior friendly homes were popular among older adults.



One participant stated:

I hope to age in place.



Communities visited for this project had many examples of improvements made to support a healthy built environment. Sidewalk repairs, rubberized pathways made in local parks, improved street lighting and benches installed on main streets are all examples older adults identified as supporting healthy aging and prevention of falls. In contrast, participants noted that sidewalks in disrepair, icy streets, and broken stairs in public spaces increase their risk of falls as they navigate through the community.

ⁱⁱⁱHealthy Built Environment. Retrieved from bchealthycommunities.ca/take-action/healthy-built-environment/#:~:text=Healthy%20built%20environments%20are%20the,support%20good%20health%20for%20all.

Opposite page: Photo of the Dawson Creek outdoor gym.

Communities support healthy aging

Communities across NH have many examples of coming together to support older adults and promote healthy aging. One example involves addressing the challenge of transportation both within the community and to nearby towns. All focus groups shared that it is difficult to secure transportation without a personal vehicle. While some communities are large enough to support a public transit system, smaller communities which don't have public transit have found innovative solutions. Northern communities provide options such as local or regional shuttle services that are free or low cost, and subsidies for taxi fares. NH supports travel for medical appointments throughout the region by offering the Northern Health Connections bus.

Another example of people in community supporting healthy aging is snow clearing. Winter weather in the North poses a significant challenge that impacts healthy aging efforts and increases falls risk for older adults. One participant stated, "Ice in the winter, that's what I am afraid of most." Many focus group participants noted that clearing personal driveways and walkways is difficult and there are challenges to finding assistance. Some communities support older adults to clear their snow through avenues such as municipalities clearing driveways of those they know need assistance, community-based snow clearing programs, municipalities reimbursing fees for snow clearing, and volunteer groups such as hockey teams shoveling snow when needed. Many participants shared stories of neighbors helping one another clear the snow.



COVID-19 pandemic and healthy aging

In the NH region, more than 60% of falls occur at home. During the COVID-19 pandemic, people were asked to stay home when possible. This project learned that many older adults continue to spend more time at home than they did pre-pandemic. This highlights the importance of safe home environments and the value of home modifications to prevent a fall.

Many older adults who engaged in this project shared they have experienced a decrease in physical strength since the start of the pandemic. This decrease in physical strength may result in an increased risk of a fall. Since the start of the pandemic, many programs paused and the opportunities for older adults to access activities, particularly those that promote strength and balance, are diminished. The majority of communities report an overall loss of community based programs offered to seniors. Communities are finding it challenging to recruit volunteers to build back or maintain programs since the pandemic. While many focus group participants view the loss of programs as having a negative impact on healthy aging efforts, they also shared that there is some increased discomfort in gathering in groups. Participants often noted that it was difficult to get back into the routine of attending programs after staying home more throughout the pandemic.

Focus group discussions highlighted the impacts of the pandemic including an increase in social isolation. One participant stated, “I hated it, COVID, it was very, very lonely.”

Opposite page: Photo of passengers boarding the NH Connections bus outside of University Hospital of Northern British Columbia (UHNBC).

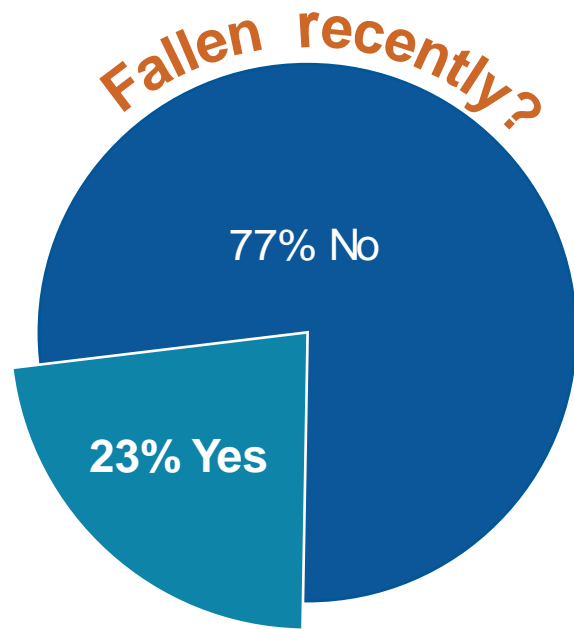
Telephone survey: What we heard

In October / November 2023, NH implemented a telephone survey inviting older adults to share their experiences with falls and falls prevention efforts. The survey was approximately 10 minutes in length and included 301 respondents from across the NH region.

The survey found that nearly one quarter of survey respondents reported a fall in the last 6 months with no significant difference across age, gender, or area of NH. When asked about the top risk factor that would contribute to a fall, respondents reported slippery surfaces.

Activities to prevent falls

Having an annual eye exam is the top activity respondents did to reduce their risk of falling over the past year, followed by engaging in strength and balance exercises, then reviewing medications with a health care professional. Women were more likely to have had an annual eye exam (70%) while those who have fallen in the last 6 months were more likely to have made changes to their home (51%), completed a home safety checklist (35%), and have spoken to their doctor (36%).



Phone survey responses to completing falls prevention activities

	Yes	No	Don't know	Not applicable
Had an annual eye exam	63%	35%	1%	1%
Engaged in strength and balance exercises	42%	56%	1%	2%
Reviewed your medications with a health care professional to reduce your risk of falling	38%	50%	3%	9%
Made changes to your home to reduce your risk of falls	34%	64%	<1%	2%
Completed a home safety checklist	24%	68%	5%	3%
Talked to your doctor or other health care professionals about your risk of falls	17%	79%	<1%	4%

Research shows that physical activity, particularly strength and balance exercise, is key to preventing a fall. Nearly everyone who participated in the survey stated that they are physically active in some way. Top activities that individuals engaged in to stay active include chores around the home; walking, cycling, and/or wheeling; and outdoor activities such as hiking, fishing, and skiing. Respondents reported having someone to do physical activity with and having free or low-cost programming options are the most important factors that facilitate people engaging in physical activity.

Survey participants were asked if there are lasting impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic. Older adults reported that there is an increase in the amount of time they spend at home and a decrease in their physical strength. Some reported finding it more challenging to get an appointment with their doctor or nurse practitioner since the start of the pandemic.



Preventing falls into the future

The information gathered in this project will inform NH and community partners on actions that can be taken to support falls prevention and healthy aging initiatives in the North. This includes identifying areas within the health system where falls prevention efforts can take place, and identifying where NH can work with community partners

The Public Health team will continue to support communities to reach their healthy aging goals and amplify efforts to prevent falls for older adults in community.

Learn more about falls prevention

Adults 65 and older can reduce the risk of a fall by doing the following:^{iv}

- 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 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.

^{iv}Fall Prevention: Risk Assessment and Management for Community Dwelling Older adults. Retrieved from gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/practitioner-professional-resources/bc-guidelines/fall-prevention.

Acknowledgments

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

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](#).





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