

# Falls and older adults: Occupational therapists working in the community to facilitate participation

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When an older adult falls, the impact can range from being quite inconsequential to a life-altering experience. A number of different interventions may assist an individual to cope with the aftermath of a fall or even prevent a fall from occurring. Occupational therapy can provide assistance to seniors if they have a fall; the primary goal of occupational therapy is to help the older adult regain their ability and confidence to return to their valued activities.

As well as working with individuals, occupational therapists are becoming involved in community development approaches to falls. Occupational therapy's focus on the integration of the environment, occupation and individual factors provides a strong framework for the development of population-based prevention programs. This article will begin with an overview of the topic of falls and older adults, followed by two examples of community occupational therapy initiatives for falls.

## Impact of a fall

Each year, one in three Canadians over the age of 65 fall and the risk of falling increases as age rises (Raina, Dukenshire, Toivonen & Lindsay, 1997). Falls are

the most common cause of injury for older adults. These individuals have a greater risk for falls than other age segments of the population and these falls can result in serious injuries. Over 90% of hip fractures among older adults are the result of a fall (Zuckerman, 1996).

Furthermore, about 40% of nursing home admissions are the direct result of a fall (Rawsy, 1998). Increasingly, falls are a major public health concern.

Following a fall, there is a high cost to the independence and quality of life for older adults. Research has demonstrated that health and well-being are influenced by the ability to engage in life's occupations. Withdrawal or changes in occupation can lead to increased dependency, lack of confidence and depression (Canadian Association of Occupational

Therapists [CAOT], 2003). Older adults who have experienced a fall are at risk for subsequent falls and a decrease in engagement in activities of daily living and/or occupations.

The financial cost to the Canadian healthcare system is also considerable. The "Report on Seniors' Falls in Canada" states that a 20% reduction in falls would result in 7,500 fewer hospitalizations, 1,800 fewer permanently disabled older adults and a national savings of \$138 million annually (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2005).

## Contribution of occupational therapy

Interventions by occupational therapists can take place in acute care hospitals, rehabilitation centres, day centres or in the community. An occupational therapy approach to fall prevention addresses personal, environmental and behavioural factors which influence older adults' participation in meaningful activities at home and in the community. The Canadian Model of Occupational Performance (CMOP) views the individual as an integration of physical, cognitive, psycho-social and spiritual compo-

## Evidence on fall prevention

From the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews on falls and fall injuries (Gillespie et al., 2005; Lyons et al., 2005; McClure et al., 2005), the following approaches have demonstrated effectiveness with different populations of older adults:

1. Population-based interventions.
2. Individual-based interventions which include: multidisciplinary, multi-factorial, health/environmental risk factor screening/intervention programmes in the community.
3. Muscle strengthening and balance retraining, individually prescribed by a trained health professional.
4. Home hazard assessment and modification that is professionally prescribed for older adults with a history of falling.
5. Withdrawal of specific psychotropic medication; cardiac pacing for fallers with cardio inhibitory carotid sinus hypersensitivity.
6. Five-week Tai Chi group exercise intervention.

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nents (CAOT, 2002). Within the context of the CMOP model, the individual interacts with his/her environment through occupations. The environment includes physical (natural and human made), social (other people), cultural (commonly held beliefs) and institutional (laws, policies) components.

This dynamic view of the person, environment and occupation provides the optimal framework to address fall recovery and support, as well as fall prevention. Occupational therapy focuses on the effect of

the fall on the older adult's activities, including the ability to take care of him/herself, manage household tasks and continue with leisure activities. This view identifies how the individual might regain any lost function either by improving their abilities or through the use of adaptive devices. Through this occupational therapy approach environmental factors can be explored that assist in maintaining independence and participation in meaningful occupations.