



Government of Western Australia
Department of Health

Falls Prevention for Aboriginal People

A tool for Aboriginal Health Workers
and Aboriginal Communities



Stay
On Your
Feet WA[®]

The development of this resource was made possible through consultation with Aboriginal community members and Aboriginal Health Workers throughout Perth and the South West, Wheatbelt and Kimberley regions of Western Australia. Their involvement in the development process assisted in guiding all aspects of the resource including the format, content and design. Thank you, to all who contributed their time and knowledge. Front cover photograph courtesy of Mary Ashe.

About this resource

Stay On Your Feet WA® is a state-wide falls prevention program aimed at reducing the incidence and severity of fall-related injuries among seniors. Funded by the Department of Health WA, the Injury Control Council of WA is the key service provider of the program in Western Australia.

The purpose of this resource is to provide guidance to health workers when talking to older Aboriginal people who are living in the community about Stay On Your Feet® and fall prevention, as well as helping them to provide older people with information so that they can prevent falls themselves.

It is important to recognise that falls are a significant health issue for Aboriginal people, as there are many factors and health conditions that can increase the likelihood of an older person having a fall.

When using this resource, it is helpful to communicate the information in the older person's first language. If you are unable to speak this language, you may require a translator or interpreter.

Using this resource



Throughout this document, the symbol shown on the left indicates a tip/suggestion or background information that may be used as a guide when talking about a topic with clients.



The symbol on the left indicates where a possible activity or discussion can be included when talking with clients.

What is a fall?

A fall is an event which results in a person coming to rest unintentionally on the ground or other level. A fall also includes slips, trips and stumbles.

Falls are not just a part of getting older and there is often a combination of risk factors involved when a person has a fall.

Who falls?

One in three people aged over 65 years will fall at least once per year^{1,2}. Among Aboriginal people, one in three people aged over 45 years will fall at least once per year. The term older people or older person refers to these age groups. The important thing to remember is that falls can be prevented.

Why is falls prevention important for older Aboriginal people?

When a person has a fall, this can result in significant injury and disability and sometimes death in an older person. Sometimes a person may only have minor injuries from a fall, such as cuts and bruises. Other times injuries may be more severe, such as a head injury or broken bones. Broken bones are the most common and serious fall related injury and this may lead to a loss of independence and mobility. A broken hip is the most common type of break. This may cause a person to become dependent on family and friends as they are no longer able to do things for themselves.

A person may also develop a fear of falling once they have had a fall³. This may cause them to stop doing certain activities that they may normally do such as walking to the shops, gardening or going out with friends. If a person stops doing these activities they can become frail and weak and lose their independence. It is important to encourage people to continue their everyday activities to help them stay active.

Falls are preventable and are not just a part of getting older. Older people may not think that falling is an issue for them. Falls prevention is about a person realising they can influence their own mobility and independence and prevent themselves from being injured.

The Nine Steps To Stay On Your Feet[®] identifies ways in which older people can prevent falls.

Step 1: Be Active

Step 2: Manage Your Medicine

Step 3: Manage Your Health

Step 4: Improve Your Balance

Step 5: Walk Tall

Step 6: Foot Care and Safe Footwear

Step 7: Regularly Check Your Eyesight

Step 8: Eat Well For Life

Step 9: Identify, Remove and Report Hazards

Some of the Nine Steps To Stay On Your Feet® may be more specific to Aboriginal people. This resource will discuss those steps. They include:

Physical activity and preventing falls

- How can you help older people stay physically active?

Health factors that may affect falls

- How can you help older people manage their health conditions?
 - Diabetes
 - Kidney disease
 - Cardiovascular disease.

Eye health

- How can you help older people manage their eye health?

Foot care and safe footwear

- How can you help older people manage their foot care and footwear?

Nutrition

- How can you help older people to improve their nutrition?

Hazards around the home

- How can you help older people to remove home hazards?

Putting together a Personal Action Plan

Physical activity and preventing falls

The most important way of reducing the risk of falling is by doing exercise. Older people should do 30 minutes of exercise on most days of the week, of low to moderate activity that increases the heart rate. This can be put together throughout the day in three 10 minute sessions. It is also important for older people to do exercises which help them with their strength, balance and coordination. Not doing enough exercise can cause a person to become weak and increase their risk of falling.

Doing exercise and being active:

- keeps muscles strong
- helps joints to move and remain stable
- keeps bones healthy and strong to help prevent Osteoporosis
- helps to keep the body at a healthy weight.

It is important for older people to keep good strength in their bodies so that they can do everyday activities such as getting out of a chair, walking up or down stairs, and getting dressed⁴. Doing exercise will help them to stay strong, healthy and independent.

How can you help older people stay physically active?

It is important to promote the benefits of doing exercise to older people and explain the role exercise plays in preventing falls. Activities that increase the strength of muscles in the legs and upper body, and improve balance are the best activities to help prevent falls. If a person has a disability or health conditions, they may need a more specific exercise program from a doctor or other health professional such as a physiotherapist/exercise physiologist.

When promoting exercises for older people, it is important to speak to them about what type of exercises they are comfortable doing. For example, some older people may only like to participate in groups in which people are of the same gender.

Walking is an easy activity for most people. Walking costs nothing and is a great opportunity for family and friends to get together and have a yarn. It can also be added to everyday activities such as walking to the shops, walking children or grandchildren to school or walking the dog. There are many activities that you can

promote to older people to help them stay active, but to keep it enjoyable, the activity needs to be interesting to them. If they don't enjoy it, they won't keep it up.

Other examples of activities include:

- gardening and housework
- riding a bike
- swimming
- fishing and going bush
- dancing
- individual exercise and gym programs .

Local Community and Recreation Centres may also offer activities or exercise classes that older people can take part in or may be specifically designed for older people.

It is important to remember that older people should have a medical check up before commencing any new physical activity.



Encourage people to discuss and think of fun ways in which they can keep active. This can be activity done either by themselves or with family and friends.



More information on physical activity can be found at:

Tomorrow People, Phone: (08) 9222 4478

www.measureup.gov.au/internet/abhi/publishing.nsf/Content/tp_home

Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet, Phone: (08) 9370 6336

www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/

Health factors that may effect falling

Older people who have a number of medical conditions have a higher risk of falling than those who are active, fit and healthy⁴. This is because some health conditions can cause them to become dizzy, light headed or confused as well as slow the time it takes to react to situations and surroundings. Eating healthy foods, drinking plenty of water, doing regular exercise, quitting smoking, and limiting alcohol intake can all help to reduce the risk of many health conditions.

It's important to encourage older people to take control of their health and manage any chronic conditions they have by being aware when things don't feel right. There are a number of long term health conditions that can be managed to help reduce the risk of having a fall.

How can you help older people to manage their health conditions?

Diabetes

The body uses insulin to turn sugar into energy. Type 2 Diabetes is a condition which happens when the body does not produce enough insulin or the insulin doesn't work the way it is meant to. Aboriginal people are at high risk of Type 2 Diabetes due to changes in traditional diet and lifestyle.

Having too much sugar in the blood may lead to complications which may affect the heart, eyes, kidneys and feet. It is important for people with diabetes to manage their condition so that these complications do not happen or do not get worse. You can help older people to manage their diabetes in a number of ways:

- Suggest that they check their blood glucose levels (BGL) regularly or have a family member, friend or health worker check it for them. Taking medications which have been prescribed by their doctor will also help to keep BGL's within the target range.
- Encourage them to see their doctor or speak to a health worker if things don't feel right.
- Encourage them to eat healthy foods which are high in fibre and low in sugar and fat. This should include fruit and vegetables, whole grain breads and cereals, lean meat and dairy products which are low in fat.
- If they drink alcohol, suggest they cut down on the amount they drink.
- At least 30 minutes of physical activity everyday is also important.
- Poor circulation and damage to the nerves can cause a number of foot problems. Encourage older people to wear safe footwear and check their feet everyday to look for redness, sores, bites, or cuts.
- Having diabetes can increase a person's risk of developing eye problems. Encourage them to have their eyes checked at least once a year and more often if they have eye problems.

Discuss signs and symptoms that older people should look out for if they have diabetes, and what things they can put in place to help manage their condition.



More information on diabetes can be found at:

Don't Ignore Diabetes – Diabetes WA, Phone: (08) 9352 7699
www.dontignorediabetes.com.au/

Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet, Phone: (08) 9370 6336
www.healthinfolnet.ecu.edu.au/

Kidney Disease

The kidneys play an important part in controlling minerals in the body, filtering the blood, removing waste and producing hormones. If the kidneys stop working, properly it will make a lot of big changes in a person's life. Treatment can be very expensive and will take them away from their family and friends for long periods of time.

Kidney disease and kidney failure are more common in Aboriginal people than non-Aboriginal people. Diabetes is the most common cause of kidney disease in Aboriginal people. There are other causes of kidney disease such as being overweight or obese, having untreated high blood pressure, and having lots of infections. If a urinary tract infection (UTI) is not treated straight away, this can become quite severe and lead to kidney damage and urinary incontinence. It is important to note that this topic might be hard to talk about with some older people and they may prefer to talk about this with some one of the same gender.

You can help older people to reduce their risk of kidney disease by encouraging them to:

- have regular check ups with their doctor or health worker
- decrease their chance of getting an infection by staying clean
- drink 6-8 glasses of water per day
- cut down on drinking alcohol and smoking
- eat lots of fruit and vegetables
- keep their weight down and participate in physical activity
- take any medication as directed by their doctor.



More information on kidney health can be found at:

Kidney Health Australia WA Branch, Phone: (08) 9381 9311

www.kidney.org.au

Continence Foundation of Australia WA Branch, Phone: (08) 9245 5262

www.continence.org.au

Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet

www.healthinonet.ecu.edu.au/

Cardiovascular Disease

Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is a serious problem and is a major cause for hospitalisation in Aboriginal people⁵. Cardiovascular diseases include coronary heart disease, stroke and hypertensive disease. There are a number of risk factors for CVD and addressing these risk factors can help to decrease the number of Aboriginal people who are affected by the disease. Some of these risk factors cannot be changed.

These include:

- family history
- age (risk increases with age)
- gender (men are at a greater risk than women)

Other risk factors can be managed or changed. You can help older people to manage these conditions by encouraging them to:

- have their cholesterol and blood pressure checked by their doctor
- cut down on smoking and the amount of alcohol they drink
- eat healthy foods which are low in saturated fats and salt
- participate in physical activity
- take any medication as directed by their doctor.



Encourage older people to talk about what changes to their lifestyle they can make to help them manage cardiovascular disease. Ask them to discuss if these changes can help them manage any of their other health conditions as well.



More information on cardiovascular disease can be found at:

Heart Foundation

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Program, Phone: (07) 3872 2531

www.heartfoundation.org.au

Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet, Phone: (08) 9370 6336

www.healthinonet.ecu.edu.au/

Eye Health

The eyes play an important role in falls prevention as they help people to cope with the environment around them. Many eye health problems can be treated and prevented. Eye problems that are most common amongst Aboriginal people include:

- diabetic retinopathy from diabetes
- infections (i.e. Trachoma)
- blindness
- problems with focussing the eye
- cataracts.

Eye problems can affect a person's sight and increase their risk of falling by making it harder:

- to see objects both close and far away
- for the eyes to adjust to changes in the light
- to judge distances or height

Blindness in older people is mainly caused by cataracts and eye infections such as trachoma. However blindness can be prevented if these conditions are treated early.

How can you help older people to manage their eye health?

You can help older people to protect their eyes by encouraging them to keep their hands and face clean. People should also be advised not to touch their eyes as this can spread infections. Touching other people's eyes, nose and mouth as well as sharing face cloths, towels and bedding can also spread infection.

Many people who have diabetes may also develop diabetic retinopathy which can lead to blindness. The only way to prevent this condition is to prevent the onset of diabetes through ensuring older people eat a wide range of nutritious foods, participate in physical activity, and maintain a healthy weight. For those who may already have diabetes, it is important to monitor and control blood sugar levels as well as blood pressure.

It is important for older people to have their eyes checked every two years, or every year if they have diabetes. They should also have their eyes checked if they injure their eye or notice their eyes are red, sore, itchy, or have blurry vision. Nurses at community clinics or health workers can do basic eye checks. Eye doctors (ophthalmologists) or optometrists may be need be seen if the problem is more serious.



More information on eye health can be found at:

International Centre for Eyecare Education, Phone: (02) 9385 7435
www.icee.org

Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet, Phone: (08) 9370 6336
<http://www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/>

Foot Care and Safe Footwear

Foot health and good footwear both play an important part in falls prevention. Foot problems and inappropriate shoes can put a person off balance and change the way they walk. Common foot problems can include ingrown or thick nails, bunions, corns and calluses. Other foot problems may be caused by medical conditions such as diabetes and arthritis, or skin conditions and problems with circulation in the feet and lower legs. Foot problems can cause lack of sensation in the foot, stiff and painful joints in the feet, ulcers and sores. If an older person has bad circulation in their legs, it may take longer for ulcers, cuts and sores to heal. The risk of a person falling may increase if the person does not care for their feet or leaves the problems untreated.

Shoes and other footwear can also cause a person to fall. Wearing socks without shoes or shoes with no grip can make a person unsteady on their feet as the floor may become slippery. Thongs, slippers and poorly fitted shoes can become a trip hazard for a person, especially if they already have existing foot problems.

How can you help older people to manage their foot care and safe footwear?

Foot problems can be avoided if people take good care of their feet and take notice when something doesn't feel right. Encourage older people to be aware of how their feet feel and to let someone know if they notice any sores or cuts on their feet so that these can be treated appropriately. It is also important for older people to have their feet checked once a year by a doctor or podiatrist as this can help to identify problems early and prevent complications. This is especially important if they have diabetes. If a doctor or podiatrist is not available, encourage them to see a health worker or have a family member check their feet for any irregularities.

Appropriate footwear is also important to prevent foot problems. Poorly fitting shoes can become a trip hazard and increase a persons risk of falling.

Examples of inappropriate footwear include:

- thongs and slippers
- slip-on shoes
- badly fitting shoes
- soft or stretched uppers
- high or narrow heels
- worn shoes
- shoes with no grip.

Some older people may not want to wear shoes but it is important to let them know the features of a 'safe' shoe should they choose to wear them. A good shoe should:

- be comfortable and support the foot
- fit well to help ensure a person can balance well to walk safely
- have laces or Velcro straps to help hold the foot inside the shoe
- be flat with broad heels and good gripping soles to give the most contact with the ground and offer the most stability
- have a high heel collar to keep the ankle stable.

Ask older people to look at the shoes they are currently wearing and identify any safe or unsafe features. If they are not wearing shoes, ask them to talk about how they currently look after their feet and any changes they could make.



Please contact the Stay On Your Feet® Resource and Information Centre if you would like to obtain a Shoe Safety Checklist.



More information on foot care and safe footwear can be found at:

Services for Australian Rural and Remote Allied Health
Indigenous Diabetic Foot Project, Phone: (02) 6285 4960
www.sarrah.org.au/site/index.cfm?display=65940

Nutrition

Nutrition plays a role in falls prevention as poor nutrition, not eating enough food and skipping meals, can cause a person to become dizzy, weak and light headed. Dizziness, weakness and a 'light head' may result in a person having a fall.

It is important for older people to be aware of what they are eating and drinking.

Too much:

- salt can lead to high blood pressure
- alcohol can reduce their concentration, coordination and judgement
- sugar and fatty foods can lead to diabetes, heart disease and other illnesses.

Not enough:

- calcium in the diet can cause bones to become weak and thin, which can increase the risk of breaking a bone when a person falls, or the risk developing osteoporosis.
- vitamin D prevents absorption of calcium
- protein can cause muscles to become weak and lose mass
- water may lead to dizziness from dehydration.

It is important for older Aboriginal people to have calcium and vitamin D in their diet. People with darker skin are more susceptible to reduced vitamin D levels as their skin pigmentation reduces the amount of vitamin D production after sun exposure. Aboriginal people are much more likely than other Australians to be hospitalised for an osteoporotic (a condition that causes the bones to become weak) hip fracture and are also, on average, much younger at the time of their fracture⁶.

How can you improve nutrition in older people?

Healthy food does not need to be expensive or hard to prepare. Good nutrition for Aboriginal people can incorporate traditional bush foods with other healthy choices available in Australia today. Most bush foods are high in fibre and low in saturated fats. Western foods tend to be higher in sugar, salt and saturated fat. Encourage people to eat more traditional foods such as:

- kangaroo meat
- fish
- damper
- vegetables
- nuts
- roots.

It is also important to tell older people to eat at least three meals a day with plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables. Drinking lots of water also prevents dehydration and helps to flush toxins from the body. Eating with family and friends can make meal times more enjoyable.

Drinking alcohol can reduce coordination and make a person unsteady on their feet, causing them to fall. Too much alcohol on a regular basis can also lead to health conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease, liver disease and various cancers. It is important not to drink too much not only to prevent falls, but also to help keep the body healthy and function correctly.



More information on nutrition can be found at:

FOODcents for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in WA Project
Deadly Tucker Cookbook, Phone: (08) 9224 1662
www.healthyfuture.health.wa.gov.au

Hazards around the home

It is common for people to think that hazards around the home are the main cause for falls; however most falls are actually caused by how the person behaves or moves in their home not by the actual hazards. What might be a hazard for one person may not be the same for another. For example, a healthy, fit person who has strong legs may be less likely to fall over a curb or step than someone who has foot problems, is overweight and has poor eyesight.

There are many different types of hazards around the home and these can have direct and indirect impacts on a person's health. Leaving rubbish on the floor can cause a person to trip up, but it can also become a breeding ground for disease. Diseases may cause a person to feel sick and weak and increase their risk of having a fall. It is important to put rubbish in the bin and also to clean up any spills on the floor.

Some common hazards which older people may find around the house include:

- objects and clutter on the floor
- rugs and loose mats
- broken flooring, e.g. missing tiles inside the house or cracked pavement outside the house
- slippery floors
- mattresses and other bedding left in walkways
- cluttered garden paths.

How can you help older people to remove home hazards?

It is important to encourage older people to identify and remove potential hazards to prevent themselves from falling. This can include hazards inside and outside the home as well as pets. Here are some suggestions which you can offer:

Inside the home

- Turn on the light when walking in dark areas
- If family or friends are living with you, make sure any bedding is put out of the way during the times that you are moving around the house
- Remove any objects which might be lying on the floor or in walkways
- Clean up any spills or rubbish straight away to reduce the risk of slipping
- Make sure any damage to the house is repaired quickly by contacting the relevant people or getting help from family members.

Outside the home

- Make sure garden paths and walkways are clear and cracked tiles or pavers are repaired
- Be aware of any animals which may trip you over
- Make sure objects such as hoses, children's toys, shoes and tools are put away after use.

Please contact the Stay On Your Feet® Resource and Information Centre to obtain a Home Safety Checklist.

Help put together a Personal Action Plan

After providing older people with falls prevention information it is important to help them put together a Personal Action Plan so that they are able to put steps in place to prevent falls before they happen.

Developing a Personal Action Plan is easy. Here is an example:

Things I need to do	Do I need to contact anyone?	I will do it...	Tick when completed
Drink three glasses of water a day	No	Today	
Check my blood glucose levels	Yes, my daughter	Tomorrow	
Have my toenails cut	Yes, my podiatrist	On Thursday when my son visits	

In order for a person to get the most out of their Personal Action Plan, they will need to refer back to it from time to time and add new actions or tick off actions that they have completed. Encourage people to talk about their action plans with friends and family. This way they are more likely to get support to help them stick to the plan they have set for themselves to stay active and mobile and prevent falls. They may also like to bring their plan back to you as part of a follow up discussion.

My Personal Action Plan

Things I need to do	Do I need to contact anyone?	I will do it...	Tick when completed

For more information or access to further resources, please contact the Stay On Your Feet® Resource and Information Centre on (08) 9420 7212 or email at soyfwa@iccwa.org.au.

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Preventing Falls and Harm From Falls in Older People: Best Practice Guidelines for Australian Community Care 2009. Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care, Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.

Wheatbelt Aboriginal Health Service

Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Service Council Inc.

Injury Control Council of Western Australia Inc.

Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet, Kurongkurl Katitjin: Centre for Indigenous Australian Education and Research, Edith Cowan University, Western Australia.

This document can be made available in alternative formats such as computer disc, audio tape or Braille, on request.

