

Arthritis and Falls

Why falls are a problem

Falls are the most common cause of injury-related hospitalization. They can result in significant injury such as fractures, disability and even death, accounting for 40% of injury related deaths in people over 65. On average, one in three people aged 65 and over will fall at least once per year. Falls are more common among older women than older men and increase with age.

Falls threaten health and wellbeing, particularly of older people. Once a person has had a fall their confidence can be seriously affected. They may develop a fear of falling and avoid physical activity. This limits their regular activities, like walking to the local shops. Their quality of life and independence are reduced and they become physically weaker which in turn increases their risk of falling.

Falls and Arthritis

Arthritis increases the risk of a fall by 2.4 times. This risk is significantly higher than for persons with coronary heart disease, circulatory disease, chronic pulmonary disease or depression. There are four main reasons for this. They have decreased strength, diminished proprioception (awareness of the position of your body), poor balance, and increased levels of pain.



Strength. People with arthritis commonly experience reduced levels of muscular strength because of disease-associated pain, joint swelling, joint damage, and secondary muscle atrophy.

Proprioception. Mechanical damage, bony deformities and joint swelling resulting from arthritis can cause a reduction in sensory information about arthritic joints. This can result in impaired perception of limb position information that is necessary for safe movement.

Balance. Reduced ability to detect and control postural sway and deficits in muscle strength and proprioception related to arthritis can also result in impaired balance. Impaired postural stability related to inflammation, pain and muscle weakness of arthritis is associated with an increased risk of falling. More reliance is placed on vision. Reaction time may also be reduced.

Pain. Pain further compromises muscle function and risk of falling in people with arthritis. Increased levels of pain have been associated with poorer balance and physical function.

Other major risk factors

1. **Inactivity** – muscle weakness through lack of exercise or physical activity.
2. **Feet** – foot problems and unsuitable or poorly fitting footwear.
3. **Eyes** – Poor eyesight or using incorrect glasses.
4. **Balance** – Poor balance which can cause difficulty in walking.
5. **Medicines** – the side-effects of some medication or mix of medications.
6. **Health factors** – memory, incontinence, Parkinson's disease, poor nutrition and confidence (fear of falling), lifestyle (smoking, alcohol), depression.
7. **Environment** – Safety hazards in and around the home (loose rugs, extension cords, etc) and in public places.

Although falls occur more often with age, it is important to remember that
falls are not a normal part of ageing.

For more information

Arthritis ACT: provides support and information to people with arthritis and arthritis related problems.

- Falls & Fractures – Falls Prevention exercise routine DVD and brochure, \$12.
- Warm Water Exercise Program – Do your own exercise or join the “Strength and Balance for Mobility” guided pool sessions.
- Community Talks “Keeping Mobile” – Presentation that includes falls prevention available to community groups.

6288 4244, www.arthritisact.org.au

ACT Community Health Falls Prevention Program: works with individuals and community organisations to raise the awareness of falls prevention and to support falls reduction services, includes The Canberra Hospital Falls and Balance Clinic and ‘Stepping On’ a falls prevention and education program for the over 70's, 6205 1585, www.health.gov.au.

Independent Living Centres: Equipment for the disabled, 6205 1900.

Medicines Line: Independent, confidential information about medicines, 1300 888 763, www.ilcaustralia.org.

Commonwealth Carelink: Information centres for older people, people with disabilities and carers about services available, how to contact them, who is eligible and whether there are any costs associated, 1800 052 222.

Osteoporosis Australia: Free information about osteoporosis and about reducing osteoporotic fractures, 1800 242 141, www.osteoporosis.org.au.

The Seniors Portal: Australian Government website for people over 50, including things that can be done to help prevent a fall, www.seniors.gov.au.

Vision Australia: Assistance for people with low vision, 1300 847 466, www.visionaustralia.org.au.

Continence Helpline: Free information and referrals to local services, 1800 330 066.

