



Foundation for
Healthy Communities



Awareness, Attitudes & Beliefs around Falls Risk and Falls Prevention Programs

Introduction

Falls among older adults are a serious public health issue. One out of three people aged 65 and older in New Hampshire fall every year.^{1,2} In 2012, 2.4 million non-fatal fall injuries among older adults were treated in emergency clinics in the U.S., and over 722,000 of these patients were hospitalized.³ In 2012, the direct medical cost of these falls, adjusted for inflation, was \$30 billion dollars.³ The financial toll of older adult falls is expected to rise to \$59.6 billion by the year 2020 due to the fact that the fastest growing segment of the United States' population is over the age of 65 years.⁴ An indirect cost borne by NH communities are the number of fall related calls managed by first responders. 2015 Trauma & EMS Information System data indicates the third most common reason dispatch reasons for emergency responses were for "Fall Victim" (9.9%).⁵ New Hampshire is one of the oldest states in the country and growing older. New Hampshire Center for Public Policy Studies estimates by 2030, nearly half a million Granite Staters will be over the age of 65, representing almost one-third of the population.⁶ **Falls however, are not an inevitable consequence of aging and can be prevented.**

Many falls are preventable, making falls prevention education and programs a critical health policy issue. Falls prevention programs with an interdisciplinary focus addressing the modifiable risk factors have been shown to reduce fall risk.⁷ Unfortunately, many older adults are not given information about reducing fall risk, nor do they participate in fall prevention programs.^{8,9} The Foundation for Healthy Communities as part of its NH Community Falls Prevention project sought to learn more about NH residents age 60 and older awareness, attitudes and beliefs around falls risk and falls prevention programs through the administration of a survey. This survey was conducted in partnership with the NH Falls Risk Reduction Task Force. The Foundation's NH Community Falls Prevention project is funded by the U.S. Administration for Community Living, Department of Health and Human Services.

Evidence-based Community Falls Prevention Programs in NH:

A Matter of Balance®

An 8 session program designed to reduce the fear of falling and increase activity levels among older adults.

Tai Ji Quan: Moving for Better Balance®

An enhancement of traditional Tai Ji Quan that transforms movements into therapeutic training for postural control (balance), daily functioning, and clinical rehabilitation for older adults and individuals with physical limitations.

Methods

The survey was designed using the construct of the health belief model to better understand what supports and what limits people’s participation in evidence-based community falls prevention programs. 369 responses of people aged 60 and older were collected between October and November 2016 from various senior centers and health provider sites across New Hampshire. This was a convenience sample of anonymous, voluntary survey takers.

Findings and Discussion

Respondents varied in age from 60 to 101 years of age with the majority between ages 65 and 84. Approximately half of survey respondents live alone.

Who, at risk of a fall, has talked to their doctors about their fall risk?

The overall percentage of respondents whose doctor talked to them about their risk of falling was **37.1%**. Fortunately, those more at risk have had conversations with a doctor at a higher rate, though perhaps not high enough. Survey respondents are considered at risk of a fall if they indicated they experienced a fall in the past 3 months, or have some level of fear associated with falling, or their concern for falling has interfered with normal social activities with family, friends, neighbors, or groups during the last 4 weeks, or indicated that others might feel they are at risk for a fall. (See table 1).

Table 1:

Risk Question	Has your doctor ever talked to you about your risk of falling? – percent responding YES
Of the 19.5% (71 respondents) who indicated they fell 1+ times in the past 3 months...	60.9%
Of the 35.6% (130 respondents) who indicated being ‘somewhat’ or ‘a lot’ fearful of falling...	56.6%
Of the 12.4% (45 respondents) during the last 4 weeks who indicated their concern of about falls has interfered with their normal social activities with family, friends, neighbors, or groups either ‘extremely’, ‘quite a bit’, or ‘moderately’...	59.1%
Of the 41.1% (144 respondents) who ‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’ that others familiar with them might feel they are at risk for a fall...	51.8%

Perceived Threat & Belief that Action Could Change Outcome

- **80.1%** of Respondents believe a fall would reduce the quality of their life.
- **79.1%** believe there are things they could do to reduce their risk of a fall.

- Those who are identified through the questions on the survey to be at a greater fall risk indicated at a higher rate their interest in registering for a falls prevention program compared to less at risk respondents by a **10 to 15%** margin.

Awareness of Evidence-Based Community Fall Prevention Programs

Clearly, programs in New Hampshire are not yet widely recognized:

- Only **38.8%** of respondents have heard of either *A Matter of Balance* or *Tai Ji Quan: Moving for Better Balance*.
- Only **28.0%** of respondents knew if either of these programs are offered in their area.

Facilitating Factors that May Affect Participation in Falls Prevention Programs

Previous studies have identified several common facilitators and barriers to older adults' participation in falls prevention programs. Evidence suggests that focusing on addressing self-efficacy and activity change may increase participation in fall prevention programs.^{10,13} Common facilitators identified have included programs that strive to meet individuals' needs, recommendations from health care providers and peers to participate, as well as a focus on positive benefits such as improvements in balance, strength, and independence.^{12,13,14,15}

In this survey the following facilitating factors were chosen most often when asked what might make them more likely to participate in a falls prevention program:

- Offered close to home - **64.9%**
- No cost – free - **63.7%**
- Doctor's advice to attend - **39.6%**
- Friendly group leader - **36.6%**

Surprisingly, a friend's encouragement to attend was only chosen **19.2%** of the time as a possible facilitator. In the comments section, participants indicated a preference for programs not offered in winter, programs offered during daytime, and a need to feel an increased need for such a program. Males chose at a higher rate than females "knowing my fall risk" as a facilitating factor.

Barriers that May Affect Participation in Falls Prevention Programs

Barriers identified in previous studies included accessibility, fatalism, low self-efficacy, illness, denial, under estimation of fall risk, embarrassment or social stigma, or inconvenience.^{10,11,12}

In our survey, the following barriers were chosen most often when asked what might make them less likely to participate in a falls prevention program:

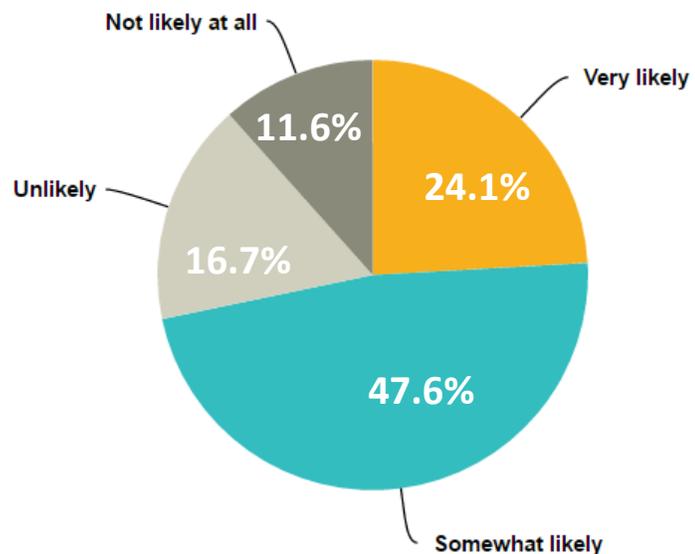
- Not offered close to home - **47.9%**
- Lack of time - **25.9%**
- Belief that I am not going to fall - **23.3%**
- Pain with exercise - **16.4%**
- Transportation issues - **16.1%**

Associating programs with being old was only chosen **6.2%** of the time. Several respondents wrote in the comments section that they felt their current activities and exercise regime was adequate to keep their fall risk at bay. Those more at risk for a fall among respondents chose ‘pain with exercise’ and ‘belief that the programs are too rigorous for them’ more often than those at less risk. Those at less risk more often chose as a barrier their belief that they are not going to fall.

What is the Likelihood Respondents Might Register for either A Matter of Balance or Tai Ji Quan: Moving for Better Balance?

When asked, “Given your understanding of your risk for a fall, the impact a fall might have on your life, the barriers and benefits you anticipate in participating in an evidence-based community prevention program, what is your likelihood that you might register for either A Matter of Balance or Tai Ji Quan: Moving for Better Balance?”, **71.7%** of respondents said they were very likely or somewhat likely.

Respondents from senior centers indicated a stronger likelihood to register than respondents from other locations. This could reflect that some people are ‘joiners’ while others are not. Males were less likely to express interest in joining in comparison to females. **56.5%** of males indicated they were “very likely” or “somewhat likely” to register in comparison to **76.7%** of females.



These results raise the matter of whether or not the series of questions asked in the survey activated respondents to be interested in community-based fall prevention programs? If so, all that remains is to offer them the opportunity to register for a specific program. This may suggest that asking people questions about their perceived risk of a fall, how detrimental a fall could be to them, and potential benefits of action is a good tool to motivate people to register for programs.

Moving Forward

It is imperative that effective falls prevention programs be offered to older adults living in the community to prevent injuries and accidental death from falls, promote independence, and decrease health service use and costs. Successful falls prevention programs need to address factors affecting participation and compliance.¹⁶ This data can be used by NH Falls Risk Reduction Task Force, organizations implementing evidence-based falls prevention programs, and other interested in increasing rates of participation and adherence to falls prevention programs.

Questions? Contact: Foundation for Healthy Communities 125 Airport Road, Concord, NH 03301
603-225-0900 www.healthynh.com or the NH Falls Risk Reduction Task Force
www.nhFallsTaskForce.org

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