

NEWS AND COMMENT

FALLS IN OLDER PEOPLE

Preventing falls in older people has been recognised as an important health issue, but do we really know the extent of the problem? How many older people in NSW fall over? How many are injured when they fall? These and other questions are answered in *Falls Risk Factors for Persons Aged 65 Years and Over* (catalogue 4393.1), a publication from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). It contains results from a survey of households conducted in NSW in October 1995. The survey was undertaken at the request of the NSW Health Department.

This survey adds to the growing store of information used to design strategies to reduce the number of falls and hence reduce the social and economic costs to individuals, their families and the community. With the ageing of the population, the size of the problem is set to increase, making it important that preventative strategies are formulated.

Data collected in the survey include: number of people who fell in the previous 12 months and whether they were injured; types of injuries; whether medical care was sought; where the fall occurred; activity being undertaken; existing medical conditions and medication; factors which contributed to falls; risk factors inside and outside the home; and changes made in previous 12 months to prevent falls.

Major findings from the survey revealed that for people aged 65 years and over, in NSW, in the 12 months to October 1995:

- one in five (139,500) people experienced at least one fall in the 12-month period;
- women were more likely to fall than men, with 24 per cent of women and 16 per cent of men aged 65 years and over having a fall;
- nearly two-thirds who fell received some sort of injury and of these, just over half sought medical care;

- 14,200 people suffered a fracture and just over three-quarters of these were women; nearly one in three falls occurred outside the home, but within the property; just over one in four occurred inside the home and one in five occurred on a public footpath, road or parking area;
- overbalancing or "legs gave way" was a contributing factor in one in five falls and slippery surfaces, uneven or cracked man-made surfaces and steps and stairs were each factors in just over one in ten falls;
- three out of five separate houses with older residents had outside steps or stairs without continuous handrails and just over half of separate houses with internal steps or stairs did not have continuous rails;
- three out of four separate houses with older residents did not have handrails fitted in the bathroom or toilet;
- eighty-three per cent of households, with at least one usual resident aged 65 years and over, had not made changes in the previous 12 months to prevent a fall; and
- six per cent of households had installed handrails on stairs or in bathrooms and 6 per cent had rearranged the contents of cupboards to allow easier access.

Falls Risk Factors for Persons Aged 65 Years and Over can be bought from the ABS Bookshop (phone (02) 268 4620), and is also available for perusal in the ABS Library and in some metropolitan and country libraries.

In addition to the publication, more information is available as an unpublished data service and can be produced to meet specific needs. A charge is generally made for this service.

Further information about the survey can be obtained from Michael Clark, ABS, on (02) 268 4498.

PUBLIC HEALTH EDITORIAL STAFF

The editor of the *NSW Public Health Bulletin* is Dr Michael Frommer, Director, Research and Development, NSW Health Department. Dr Lynne Madden is production manager.

The *Bulletin* aims to provide its readers with population health data and information to motivate effective public health action. Articles, news and comments should be 1,000 words or less in length and include a summary of the key points to be made in the first paragraph. References should be set out using the Vancouver style, the full text of which can be found in *British Medical Journal* 1988; 296:401-5.

Please submit items in hard copy and on diskette, preferably using WordPerfect, to the editor, *NSW Public Health Bulletin*, Locked Mail Bag 961, North Sydney 2059. Facsimile (02) 391 9029.

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