

# FALLS PREVENTION

INSIGHTS FROM THE NORTHWEST



# Table of contents

---

- Introduction.....4
- Focus group background.....5
- Focus group themes.....6
  - Falls are common among participants.....7
  - Community programs and resources.....7
  - Individuals preventing falls.....8
  - Winter climate.....8
  - Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic.....9
  - Transportation.....10
  - Our environment and preventing falls.....11
  - Home modifications.....12
  - Physical activity.....13
  - Communication channels.....13
- Municipalities and Community Plans.....14
- Learn more about falls prevention.....15
- Acknowledgements.....16
- Appendix A: Focus groups community highlights.....18
  - Houston.....19
  - Metlakatla.....20
  - Prince Rupert.....21
  - Stewart.....22
  - Terrace.....23



**In all communities visited, seniors centres are the hub for older adults to access resources or to gather for activities.**

# Introduction

---

Falls are a leading cause of injury across British Columbia (BC). They represent the number one cause of injury-related hospitalizations in the Northern Health (NH) region. One in three adults over 65 fall each year.<sup>i</sup> A fall can have a significant impact on the quality of life for an individual as well as an impact on the health care system.

Between 2002 and 2019, the total falls related hospitalizations in NH for older adults (65+ years) was 10,976 (with a rate of 1,937.9 per 100,000). For the same period, the estimated cost of hospitalizations due to falls in NH was \$173 million (approximately \$9.6 million per year) and resulted in a total length of stay in hospital of 181,809 days.<sup>ii</sup>

The NH Injury Prevention team received a grant from the Pacific Public Health Foundation to better understand the experience of communities regarding falls prevention across NH. The Public Health team visited and conducted a series of fifteen focus groups, with five in communities in the Northwest region.

This report will share the findings from the focus group sessions in the [Northwest](#) (NW).

---

<sup>i</sup> Seniors' Fall Prevention. Government of British Columbia. (n.d.). Retrieved from: [www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/managing-your-health/injury-prevention/seniors-fall-prevention](http://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/managing-your-health/injury-prevention/seniors-fall-prevention)

<sup>ii</sup> BCIRPU Injury Data Online Tool, 2024. Discharge Abstract Database (DAD), 2002-2019 (combined). Ministry of Health.

# Focus groups background

---

NH's Public Health team hosted a series of focus groups in five communities located in Northwest BC starting June to October 2023. Four communities visited were situated across the traditional and unceded territories of the Tsimshian people, Wet'suwet'en peoples and the Nisga'a, Skii km Lax Ha. The communities are colonially known as Terrace, Prince Rupert, Houston, and Stewart. The team was invited to visit Metlakatla First Nation in October.

The northwest communities visited ranged in population from 110 to 12,000. Communities were selected using a set of criteria which included an assessment of the population demographics, the location in the health authority, the healthcare resources in community and the community engagement in projects that support healthy aging.

Participants were invited to the focus group in a variety of ways. NH Communications posted promotions on social media and on the NH webpage. Community partners put up posters and shared the event with their networks. The focus groups ranged in size from 11 to 33 participants.

The focus groups consisted of participants who were adults aged 65+ along with interested community members. They were invited to share the following:

What people are currently doing to prevent a fall.

- What resources are available to help prevent falls.
- The unique ways falls are prevented in community.
- How the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted falls prevention efforts.

# Focus group themes

---

This report will highlight the themes identified in the focus group sessions related to falls prevention and healthy aging. This summary serves as a snapshot of what we heard in these discussions and may not reflect all opinions of community members or the full range of community resources available.

From the focus group sessions in the Northwest, the following themes emerged:

- Falls are common among participants.
- Community programs that support healthy aging have significant strengths and unique challenges.
- Individuals have acted to prevent a fall.
- Winter climate increases risk of falls.
- The COVID-19 pandemic had both a positive and negative impact on healthy aging efforts.
- Transportation is a challenge for older adults to maintain health and some communities have found innovative solutions.
- Community spaces design and maintenance have an impact on the risk of falls.
- Home modifications prevent falls but are challenging to implement.
- Older adults in NH enjoy a wide variety of physical activities.
- Commonly used communication channels are typically unique to the community.

## Falls are common among participants

Focus group participants were invited to share their fall experiences. The places people reported falling include in their homes, in their yards, and outdoors in the community. One participant stated, “I am deathly afraid of falling.”

Common causes of falls include:

- Slip and trip hazards.
- Stairs
- Ice
- Falling from heights (e.g., ladder)

## Community programs and resources

In the Northwest, communities have many programs and resources that support falls prevention and healthy aging. For example, many older adults attend strength and balance exercise group classes and socialize at events such as community luncheons.

In all communities visited, seniors centres are the hub for older adults to access resources or to gather for activities. The programs highlighted include meal delivery services and numerous physical activity events.

Participants reported accessing local health care services available in their community such as a doctor and home support worker. Participants in some communities lack access to the health services (e.g., optometrist) and travel outside of their home community for these supports.

An identified gap in services available to older adults is those that conduct outdoor maintenance such as gutter cleaning and window washing. Both activities were identified as a risk for falling at home.



## Individuals preventing falls

In the Northwest, focus group participants offered many examples of the measures individuals take to reduce their risk of falling. Common actions include wearing sturdy footwear outside and in the house, clearing their home of clutter, ensuring good lighting to the bathroom at night, using a fall alert device or carrying a cell phone at all times. Some participants discussed their risk of falling with their primary care provider and created a care plan to prevent a future fall.

## Winter climate

All focus group participants discussed the snow and ice in winter and the resulting increased risk of falls. Many groups shared that the municipalities clear the snow on the roads but the buildup of ice or the snow from the plow continues to present a challenge to safe mobility. There were many examples of how the community came together to clear snow around homes. Terrace participants shared that a local hockey team volunteers to clear snow on the driveways of seniors. Houston has routine snow clearing done at the seniors housing complex while the Better at Home program clears driveways for others. Many participants shared examples of neighbors clearing snow for one another. While programs are in place to assist in clearing snow and ice, finding volunteers and reaching all seniors in the community continues to be a challenge.







### **Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted falls prevention and healthy aging efforts. The Houston focus group stated that many older adults maintained or even increased their walking and biking through the pandemic.

Every community has examples of programs being cancelled through the pandemic. Many of them have yet to re-start. Focus group participants speculated this may be due to the pandemic impacts on funding available, less people volunteering and less engagement in public programs overall. Seniors shared the increased social isolation disconnected them from their typical communication channels to learn of community events. This has contributed to less participation in community groups and events.

## Transportation

Both local and regional travel present a challenge for older adults in the NH. Transportation challenges limit access to healthcare and community services, impacting efforts to prevent falls and support healthy aging. Terrace and Houston have a Handy-DART service. Terrace and Prince Rupert have a local transit system and taxi service however several participants commented on challenges with scheduling and expressed concerns for safety. The costs of insurance and gas to leave the community to attend medical appointments are a burden. Stewart supports travel through an emergency fund that raises money through the local thrift store. This is available for those who need to travel out of community for medical appointments.



## Our environment and preventing falls

The way public spaces and homes are designed and maintained in community is important to prevent a fall. The Terrace focus group highlighted that the City of Terrace is working to address accessibility challenges in the community. Participants in Houston shared the many features of their independent living complex. Such features include no stairs in the home, grab bars in every suite, and seamless transitions on floors between apartments and shared spaces.

A common challenge raised at focus groups are the cracks and general disrepair of sidewalks and streets. One participant noted the many layers of paint on a crosswalk creates an uneven surface that puts pedestrians at risk to fall.



## Home modifications

Home assessments and modifications contribute to falls prevention efforts by creating a safer environment. Examples of home modifications include fixing broken stairs, securing handrails, and installing grab bars in a bathroom.

Home modifications to prevent falls garnered substantial discussion in the Northwest focus groups. The groups agreed that modifications are important for falls prevention but getting a contractor or someone in the community to make the modifications is incredibly challenging. Several participants reported having stairs in their home and had installed handrails themselves or identified a need to have it done. Another challenge identified with home modifications was if the older adult is a renter there is the additional need to obtain landlord permission for the upgrade.



## Physical activity

Physical activity is important for healthy aging. Strength and balance exercises help prevent falls.

Many focus group participants shared the variety of physical activities that keep them healthy and assist in preventing falls. All communities the team visited have an indoor space for community members to be physically active. These spaces can be found in the recreation center, seniors centre or gym. Activities that older adults participate in through the NW include walking groups, bowling, curling, biking, swimming, fishing, snowshoeing, and skiing. Many focus group discussions highlighted the importance of a social support network and transportation to encourage physical activity.

When the topic of virtual exercise programs was explored, there was little interest in signing into a class as the participants preferred in-person programming.

## Communication channels

NH is interested in learning more about the communication channels and platforms that older adults prefer to use. When asked how people prefer to receive health information or program promotions, responses included Facebook, local radio, and newspaper. Many participants prefer learning about health information or events in-person or in flyers distributed by community agencies or seniors' centres.



# Municipalities and Community Plans

---

Municipalities continually work to provide programs and maintain or build infrastructure that supports health and wellbeing. Often falls prevention initiatives can be found in community plans such as Active Transportation Plans and in projects such as those funded by the Age-friendly BC program. Visit the municipal websites below to learn more about each community.

- [Metlakatla First Nation](#)
- [City of Terrace](#)
- [District of Houston](#)
- [District of Stewart](#)
- [City of Prince Rupert](#)



# Learn more about falls prevention

Adults 65+ can reduce the risk of a fall by doing the following activities.<sup>iii</sup>

- Talk to your doctor/ primary care provider about falls.
- Talk to your pharmacist or doctor/primary care provider about medications that may increase the risk of a fall.
- Complete a [home safety checklist](#) to make your home safer.
- Engage in strength and balance exercises (or activities that improve your strength and balance). Aim to accumulate 150 minutes or more of activity per week.
- Talk to your doctor/primary care provider about steps you can take to maintain good health such as visiting your optometrist and managing any chronic conditions.

To learn more about falls prevention in community and for funding opportunities that support healthy aging, scan the QR code below or visit the [NH Injury prevention webpage](#).



<sup>iii</sup> Fall Prevention: Risk Assessment and Management for Community Dwelling Older adults. Retrieved from [www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/practitioner-professional-resources/bc-guidelines/fall-prevention](http://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/practitioner-professional-resources/bc-guidelines/fall-prevention)

# Acknowledgements

---

Northern Health would like to thank all the focus group participants for sharing their experiences, opinions, ideas, and expertise. We are also grateful to the community organizations, leaders and staff who supported the focus group planning.





# Appendix



# Appendix A: Focus group community highlights

---

The Population and Public Health (PPH) team partnered with community organizations to host a series of focus groups in seniors' centers, recreation centers and community halls. Community members and older adults 65+ were invited to participate through a variety of ways including invitations from community partners, community email newsletter, Facebook promotions, bulletin board posters and personal invites.

Focus group discussions were facilitated by the PPH team in either one large group or through dividing the participants into smaller group conversations. Key points were recorded and later themed for this report.

The focus groups in the Northwest ranged from 11 to 33 participants. Facilitated discussions invited people to share the following:

- What people are currently doing to prevent a fall.
- What resources are available to help prevent falls.
- The unique ways falls are prevented in community.
- How the COVID-19 pandemic impacted falls prevention efforts.

While this full report reflects the information shared in all focus groups, below are the community-specific highlights related to healthy aging. The details outlined from each community are intended to reflect key points of discussion shared in each session.

# HOUSTON

Date of focus group: June 21, 2023

## What we heard

### What are the healthy aging supports?

- The Seniors' Centre hosts many well attended activities that keep people active such as floor curling and carpet bowling.
- Houston has several resources for snow clearing such as support from Better at Home, and neighbors helping one another. Subsidies are available to help hire people to clear the snow.
- The HandyDART is free to those 65+ in community.
- The housing complex for seniors independent living is built with features such as grab bars to prevent falls.
- Programs such as Better at Home strongly support healthy aging.

### What are the healthy aging challenges?

- Certain sidewalks in the community need repair.
- There is a lack of indoor areas that can be accessed by walking groups. The mall was once used but the lack of benches and bathrooms resulted in the walking groups no longer using that space.
- Health care resources such as optometry are not available locally and therefore there is a need to travel for care.
- Older adults are less confident with their abilities to use the local gym equipment without in-person support.

## **METLAKATLA**

Date of focus group: Oct 3, 2023

### **What we heard**

#### **What are the healthy aging supports?**

- Accessible housing is available for Elders in the community.
- Fresh fruit and vegetable boxes are delivered to homes in the community.
- The community shuttle assists Elders to get to and from the ferry and home.
- Community members, including Elders, stay active by gathering and preserving food.
- Physiotherapists routinely travel to the community to deliver care.

#### **What are the healthy aging challenges?**

- Travelling by boat to Prince Rupert for goods and services is difficult for some Elders.
- First responders are not available in the event of an emergency.
- Nursing services are not available after hours and on weekends.
- The recreation centre is temporarily closed due to lack of staff.
- The ramp leading from the ferry to shore is steep and can be slippery from ice in the winter.

## PRINCE RUPERT

Date of focus group: Oct 5, 2023

### What we heard

#### What are the healthy aging supports?

- There are many resources to support physical activity for older adults such as programming at the recreation centre, the community pool, Tai Chi classes, line dancing, and yoga.
- The seniors' centre is a hub for programming such as meals, computer training and social events.
- The seniors' centre has a robust communication network where older adults learn about events and programs.
- Older adults have access to health care professionals such as pharmacists and optometrists in the community.
- Programs such as Better at Home and Meals on Wheels support healthy aging in place.

#### What are the healthy aging challenges?

- Icy conditions in the winter present a falls risk, particularly on the many hills in neighborhoods.
- The poor condition of stairs in public spaces increase the risk of a fall.
- Some sidewalks which are in disrepair increase the risk of a fall.
- Since the pandemic, the participation in programming for older adults has decreased.
- Streets without adequate lighting at night deter older adults from walking in the community.

## STEWART

Date of focus group: June 23, 2023

### What we heard

#### What are the healthy aging supports?

- Stewart Community Connections supports healthy aging with programs such as home support, meal programs, and assistance to complete home safety checklists.
- Stewart Community Connections operates the Golden Triangle Gym and offers space for community member led exercise classes.
- The Stewart Health Centre loans mobility aids for no cost to older adults.
- Community members often help one another clear their driveways (but not walkways) of snow.
- The community doctor supports older adults with medication reviews and falls assessments.
- Stewart has a community champion that leads a popular strength and balance exercise class.

#### What are the healthy aging challenges?

- Focus group participants want a seniors' centre but do not have access to a facility.
- Older adults need to leave the community to receive certain health care services such as Optometry.
- Travel to other communities for healthcare and other services is cost prohibitive.
- Many homes in Stewart have stairs and there is limited capacity to have home modifications completed to prevent a fall.
- Potholes in the street and uneven sidewalks were identified as a falls risk.

## TERRACE

Date of focus group: June 20, 2023

### What we heard

#### What are the healthy aging supports?

- The local youth hockey teams will help older adults clear snow.
- The recreation centre offers strength and balance exercise programs, which supports falls prevention.
- Health professionals at a local optometry clinic provide treatment for balance concerns.
- Community resources such as the Happy Gang and the Skeena Valley Seniors Society support healthy aging.
- Many participants had completed home modifications such as upgrades to lighting and installation of handrails.
- Many participants had made their home safer by removing trip hazards on the floor and wearing sturdy footwear in the home.

#### What are the healthy aging challenges?

- Garbage bins and other obstacles in the roads present a risk for a fall.
- Curbs and sidewalks in disrepair (including the thick layers of paint on the crosswalks) create an uneven surface which increase the risk of a fall.
- Lack of handrails in the community are identified as increasing one's risk of a fall.
- There are few contractors in the community to hire to complete home modifications.
- Older adults find it difficult to navigate the community with public transportation due to safety concerns and scheduling.



# northern health

*the northern way of caring*

Northern Health Regional Office  
Suite 600, 299 Victoria Street  
Prince George, BC, V2L 5B8

250-565-2649  
1-866-565-2999

[northernhealth.ca](http://northernhealth.ca)

