

What social care Occupational Therapists can do to help people when they have fallen

The issue

Service users and carers are asking social care Occupational Therapists (OTs) for advice on how to get up from a fall, as they don't want to call the ambulance service or Sirona when no injuries are involved. Enabling service users to get up from such falls would save money, alleviate pressure on services and might improve their outcomes.

What we wanted to find out

We wanted to answer this question: How can OTs best help service users get up from falls where no injury has been sustained?

What we did

We searched academic databases for systematic reviews or individual studies published since 2010 that contained any evidence relevant to our questions. We assessed the quality of the evidence using adapted CASP tools. We included only research that helped us answer our question.

What we found

We included evidence from two systematic reviews.^{1,2} We also included a study of the knowledge, skills and attitudes of older people and staff about getting up after a fall³ because this contained relevant information on this topic for OTs in social care. The evidence we found was focused on the experiences of older people.

A 2020 Royal College of Occupational Therapy (RCOT) Guideline covered a wide range of issues relevant to the prevention of falls. It did not address the specific research questions but does provide valuable guidance around the role of the OT in preventing and managing falls more generally (see ConnectED Briefing number 2).

What the evidence suggests

There are techniques that people can learn to help them get up after a fall. These often need practice and may not be effective unless people have adequate strength.

Backward chaining: There is emerging evidence that Backward Chaining may improve the ability of older people to get up unassisted from the floor. It may also improve their mobility, with fewer falls and a reduced fear of falling.

Backward Chaining is a method in which the movements needed to get up from the floor to an upright position are taught and practised step-by-step in reverse order. The Backward Chaining Method (BCM) includes a focus on managing anxiety and 'motor-imagery'. Motor imagery can assist learning by first imagining the steps required to move from a prone to a standing position.

Evidence for the potential effectiveness of the BCM for helping older adults at risk of falling comes from a systematic review of seven studies² of various kinds (including 4 RCTS) and involving a total of 446 participants whose average age was around 82 years. The quality of these studies is variable and the authors emphasise the need for further research in clinical practice settings.

Other interventions: There is some limited evidence that interventions that include resistance training may help older people to be able to get up by themselves and that higher 'doses' of resistance training may be better than low 'doses'. Intensive rehabilitation combined with the BCM may be better than a less intensive rehabilitation programme combined with conventional method i.e. rolling onto four point knee, moving to knee standing, then standing (one RCT, 80 participants, average age 86 years).

Conclusions

Providing training and/or information to those who live or work with older people, or to older people themselves that could give them practice at getting up, may help to address the time constraints facing health professionals.³

Where older people are assessed as needing balance or strength training interventions, or specialist falls intervention, the OTs in social care should refer to the appropriate services.

There may also be a need for further research that includes participants who are not older people.

For more information about this Briefing, contact

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Useful information

In North Somerset: if a service user needs referral to the Specialist Falls Clinic, this must be done by a health rather than a social care professional. Link back to healthcare provider to make a referral if you think it is appropriate.

Those who may be unable to get up without assistance and are uninjured should be advised to try contacting Sirona on 0300 125 6789. For those with a Carelink system (e.g. pendant or wristband), Response 24 may be able to provide support.

Useful video for service users, carers and OTs

Consider signposting to NHSinform: What to do if you Fall – includes NHS Scotland 'Upwards and Onwards' video for service users and carers:

- <https://www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/preventing-falls/dealing-with-a-fall/what-to-do-if-you-fall/> (Accessed 9th August 2022)

Local services

Sirona: [Falls and Balance – Sirona care & health NHS services \(sirona-cic.org.uk\)](http://sirona-cic.org.uk)

Age UK falls support classes in North Somerset: [Stay Strong, Stay Steady sessions \(ageuk.org.uk\)](http://ageuk.org.uk)

References

¹ Burton, E., Farrier, K., Lewin G., Petrich, M., Boyle, E and Hill, K.D. (2020). 'Are interventions effective in improving the ability of older adults to rise from the floor independently? A mixed method systematic review', *Disability and Rehabilitation* [online] 42 (6): 743-753.

² Leonhardt, R., Becker, C., Groß, M. and Mikolaizak, AS. (2020) 'Impact of the backward chaining method on physical and psychological outcome measures in older adults at risk of falling: a systematic review', *Aging Clinical and Experimental Research*, **32**, 985-997

³ Swancutt, DR, Hope, SV, Kent, BP, Robinson M, and Goodwin CA. (2020) 'Knowledge, skills and attitudes of older people and staff about getting up from the floor following a fall: a qualitative investigation', *BMC Geriatrics* [online] 20 (385) [Accessed 6th June 2022].

⁴ Royal College of Occupational Therapists (2020) *Occupational therapy in the prevention and management of falls in adults: Practice Guide* (2nd edition). <https://www.rcot.co.uk/practice-resources/rcot-practice-guidelines/falls>