

Social care Occupational Therapist involvement in falls management

The issue

Social care Occupational Therapy (OT) services are seeing increasing numbers of referrals that are related to falls. There is a need for social care OTs to understand what interventions are most helpful in helping to improve the outcomes of service users when they have fallen and for alleviating pressure on services.

What we wanted to find out

We wanted to explore two questions:

1. What is the role of the social care OT in the management of falls?
2. What social care OT interventions are most helpful in delivering good outcomes to service users who have already experienced a fall?

What we did

While searching academic databases to inform ConnectED Briefing 1 (What social Occupational Therapists can do to help people when they have fallen), we identified a 2020 Royal College of Occupational Therapy (OT) Guideline¹ that reviews and summarises the role of the OT in preventing and managing falls in adults. This was developed with stakeholders, including members of the public and OT practitioners. The evidence in it was appraised for quality and graded to indicate how confident the authors were in it. The guideline was last updated in 2020 and is due to be further updated or withdrawn in 2025.

This guideline was helpful in reminding the writers of this briefing about key aspects of the role OTs can play in falls management, and the evidence that supports this work. Here, we summarise evidence from the guideline that addresses our questions.

What the evidence suggests

Social care OTs can support service users and carers through: identifying and offering modifications for the home environment; helping them keep active in ways that reduce their fear and risk of falling again, and; by ensuring interventions are meaningful to the person.

Reducing the risk of falls: We can be confident in the effectiveness of *home hazard assessments* conducted by OTs both in the community and prior to and immediately post hospital discharge in reducing hospital readmission for older people living in the community with a history of falls. There is also good evidence of the usefulness of such an assessment for those with severe visual impairment. Assessment is not likely to be effective unless *part of a wider programme* including *home modification* and advice around *meaningful activity* (RCOT 2020: 20-25). There is growing evidence that providing advice on *assistive devices* (e.g. night monitoring or alarms systems) as part of this assessment will also be beneficial (RCOT 2020: 26-25)

Reducing the fear of falling: The evidence highlights *the link between fear and activity levels*. When activity is restricted, people may experience depression, anxiety and loss of independence. There is good evidence for the effectiveness of OT interventions that *encourage confidence* and *promote a*

balance between risk and activity. These include *listening to service users' views* and acting on this by finding ways to help them to continue to do things that are important to them, as well as facilitating caregivers, family and friends to take a *positive approach to risk* (RCOT 2020: 29-31).

Making falls management meaningful: to be most effective, falls management interventions should be *meaningful for service users*. OT intervention should *emphasise potential benefits* (e.g. improved mobility and independence) rather than negatives or risks associated with falling. Interventions are likely to be most effective when service users feel they are *relevant to them, when they feel engaged, listened to and in control*, and when *information about the intervention is made accessible* for the individual. (RCOT 2020: 34-42)

Conclusions

Social care OTs have a particularly important role to play in conducting home hazard or risk assessments for people who have fallen. Assessments are most effective when they are one part of an OT-led intervention that also includes home modifications and continuing support for service users to keep active in ways that are meaningful to them, and which helps them service users to balance risk and activity.

It is important to recognise that any intervention that increases a person's activity (including falls prevention programmes) may also bring with it an increased risk of falls.

There are limitations to some of the evidence considered in the guideline. Many of the studies relate to older people. Also, studies often do not include people with conditions such as dementia. The authors suggest however, that it is likely that the benefits of applying person-centred principles and individualised interventions in falls management will apply across all ages and clinical conditions

There may be a need for further research to examine the role of OTs in working with groups other than older people, as well as about cost-effectiveness of the social care OT role in falls management and in relation to the use of assistive technology.

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Useful further information

Downloads available:

- Occupational therapy in the prevention and management of falls in adults (2020) – full practice guideline: <https://www.rcot.co.uk/file/549/download?token=9TyCbQIZ>
- Quick Reference and Implementation guide (PDF) summarising all the evidence and recommendations in the full Guideline: <https://www.rcot.co.uk/file/3388/download?token=iEn9O51A>
- Falls CPD session powerpoint presentation that can be amended: <https://www.rcot.co.uk/file/1559/download?token=X0tnnlqn>
- Audit Form – can be used alongside the Guideline to assess and make changes to your current practice: <https://www.rcot.co.uk/file/1559/download?token=X0tnnlqn>

Local services and information

In North Somerset specialist falls service referrals can only be made by a healthcare professional. This does not include social care professionals. Refer back to healthcare provider to make a referral if you think it is appropriate. For strength and exercise classes:

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

Age UK falls support classes in North Somerset: [Stay Strong, Stay Steady sessions](#)

References

¹ 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>