

# FALLS PREVENTION

INSIGHTS FROM  
THE NORTHERN INTERIOR



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**Physical activity  
is important for  
healthy aging.  
Strength and  
balance exercises  
are proven to  
prevent falls.**

# Introduction

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Falls represent a significant burden of injury across British Columbia (BC) and have a substantial impact on the lives of those who fall, representing the number one cause of injury-related hospitalizations in Northern Health (NH). One in three adults over 65 falls each year in BC.<sup>i</sup>

Between 2002 and 2019, the total fall related hospitalizations in NH for older adults (65+ years) was 10,966 (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 in Public Health is interested in learning more about the experience of falls among older adults in northern communities and how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted prevention efforts. Overall, the goal of this project is to support and focus on northern communities, as well as NH action towards strategies that promote healthy aging in place and reduce the incidence of preventable falls among older adults.

To learn about individual and community level experiences of falls, the Public Health team conducted a series of focus groups. This project is supported by grant funding provided by the Pacific Public Health Foundation.

Fifteen focus groups were conducted across the Northern Health region. This report will share the findings from the six focus group sessions in the [Northern Interior](#) (NI).

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<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

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Starting in the spring of 2023, NH's Public Health team conducted a series of focus groups in six communities located in the Northern Interior. Each of the communities visited were situated across the traditional and unceded territories of the Lake Babine Nation, Treaty 8 Territory, the Lhtako Dene people, the Secwepemc people, and the Territory of Lheidli T'enneh. The communities are colonially known as Granisle, Mackenzie, Quesnel, Valemount and Prince George. The team was invited in June to Tachet, a community in the Lake Babine Nation.

The communities visited ranged in population from less than 400 to almost 90,000. Communities were selected based on a series of criteria which included an assessment of the population demographics, the location in the health authority, the health care 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 between five to 24 participants.

The focus groups consisted of participants who were adults aged 65+ along with community members who 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 groups: What we heard

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This report outlines the themes identified in the focus group sessions related to falls prevention and healthy aging. This summary is intended to serve as a snapshot of what was shared in the discussion and may not reflect all opinions of community members or the full range of community resources available.

From the focus group sessions, the following themes emerged:

- Falls were common among participants.
- Community programs have significant strengths and unique challenges when supporting healthy aging.
- Commonly used communication channels are unique to the community.
- Winter climate increases the risk of falls in the community.
- The COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on healthy aging efforts.
- Transportation is a challenge for older adults to maintain health and some communities have produced innovative solutions.
- Homes and community spaces impact the risk of falls and making improvements are a challenge.
- Older adults in the North enjoy a wide variety of physical activities.

## Falls are common among participants

Each focus group invited participants to share their experience of falls. These experiences highlight the importance of falls prevention as many stories were shared of falls, some of which resulted in serious injuries. Participants shared that often a fall was from the same level and took place either inside their home or in their yard. Some participants fell while enjoying the trails around their communities. In some instances, people fell while trying to manage firewood to heat their homes.

## Community programs and resources

Community organizations play a role in healthy aging in several ways. Programs that support falls prevention include activities such as strength and balance exercise. Organizations that provide group activities offer a place to socialize and form connections.

Each community had a wide range of programs and supports for healthy aging. Organizations that are leading the way include Better at Home, community paramedics, Men's Sheds, the YMCA, and senior centres. These organizations often provide programming such as meal delivery, group exercise, organized events/clubs, and social events. All communities visited had a place to gather such as a senior centre, recreation centre, band office or community hall.

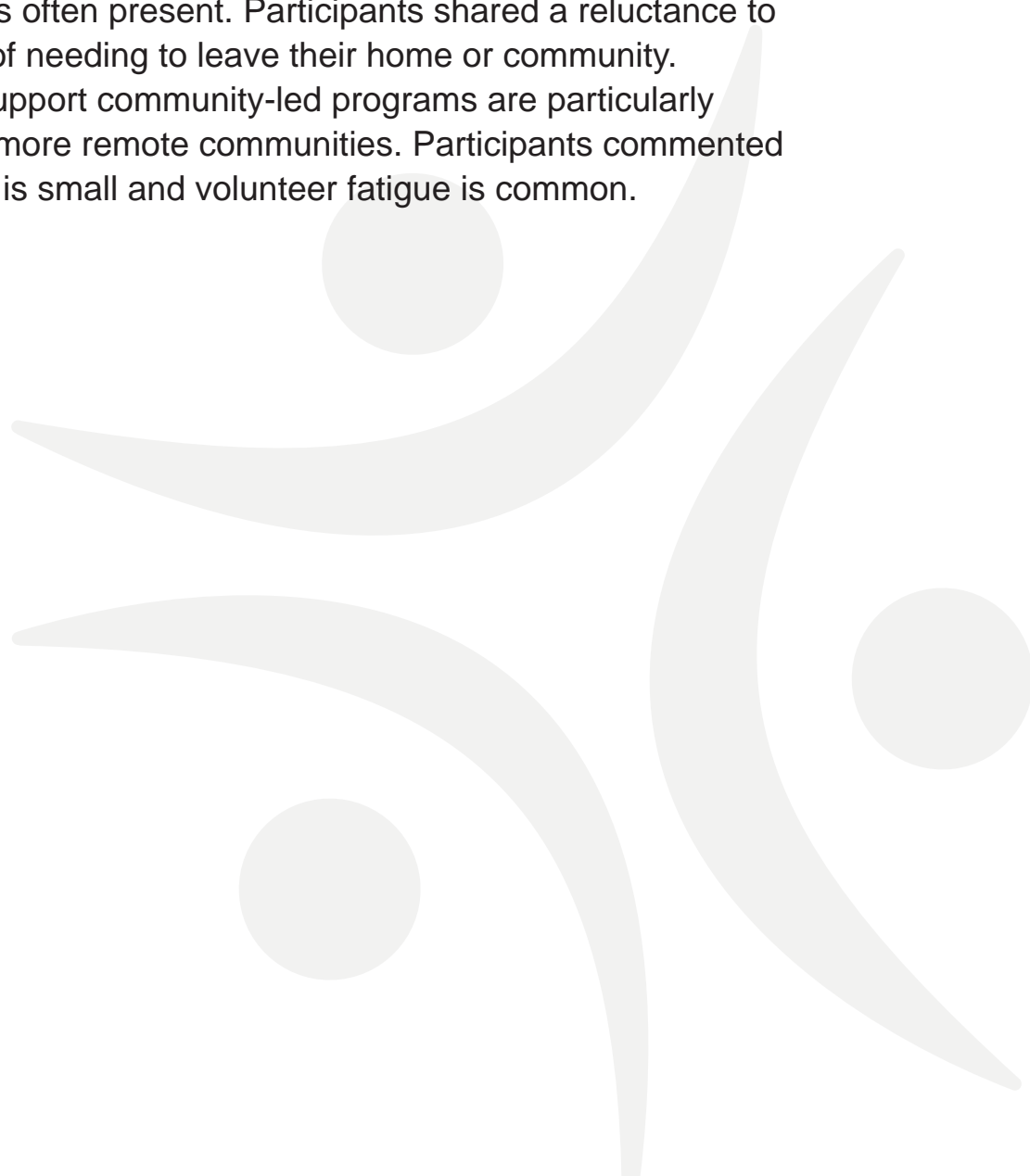
Most communities have access to a local pharmacist, a physiotherapist or occupational therapist. In some cases, the physiotherapist or occupational therapist who serves the community lives in the same community but in other cases the professional travels in to provide clinics.

A common theme reported in smaller, remote communities is the strong community connections they maintain and the routine practice of neighbours helping one another. Examples of assistance with snow removal, yard work or home modifications are common. When asked what helps to prevent a fall, a participant in Quesnel commented, "I have good neighbours [who support each other]." One example of a formalized support system is in Mackenzie. Mackenzie has a phone tree listing the contact information of people who are older or more vulnerable in the community. This phone tree can be used in emergencies like a wildfire.



Not surprisingly, smaller communities face unique challenges due to small populations and geographic remoteness. Smaller communities such as Valemount, Granisle, Tachet, and Mackenzie must travel to larger communities to access resources that support falls prevention such as an assessment from an optometrist. Some communities have loan cupboards for mobility aids, while others have to travel several hours in order to borrow or return equipment. One community shared that if an individual needs mobility aid or has difficulty living independently, often they will move to a larger, more accessible community with increased supports.

There is a strong sense of independence in small northern communities and stigma related to falls is often present. Participants shared a reluctance to disclose a fall for fear of needing to leave their home or community. Human resources to support community-led programs are particularly challenging in smaller more remote communities. Participants commented that the volunteer pool is small and volunteer fatigue is common.







## Winter climate

In every focus group, snow and ice were identified as a key risk factor to falls in the community. While participants often mentioned that snow clearing was done on the streets, the ridge of snow left by the plows was highlighted as a potential fall risk. Some participants shared they are hesitant to leave the house in the winter due to fear of falling. While some communities have programs and supports to clear driveways of snow, others do not. When discussing personal risk of falls, one participant in Quesnel stated, “ice in winter, that’s what I am afraid of most.”

## Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

When discussing how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the community falls prevention efforts, every community had examples of programs that stopped, many of which have not re-started. Several participants expressed their discomfort with group activities or being in public since the pandemic. Some participants shared they stay home more and, consequently, have lost some of their strength. This loss of strength increases their fear of falling.

It was highlighted that while there are less group exercise classes available, there is also less interest in participating in existing programs due to the increased discomfort of being in a crowd since the start of the pandemic. Prince George participants shared they continue to enjoy physical activity classes, but attendance has diminished since the start of the pandemic.



## Transportation

Local public transportation to support healthy aging is a challenge in every community visited in the Northern Interior. Some communities are finding innovative solutions. Prince George and Quesnel have a local bus service with varying days and hours of operation. Valemount has a wheelchair accessible shuttle for local destinations. The District of Mackenzie has a taxi service with subsidies for older adults or people experiencing financial need.

For those who need to travel out of the community for appointments or services, Mackenzie and Granisle both have shuttles that charge a small fee to travel to nearby communities. The [Northern Health Connections Bus](#) was identified as a resource for some communities to travel to medical appointments.

Participants shared some community members drive each other to nearby communities but noted that the cost of gas and accommodations is a burden.



## Our environment and preventing falls

Few communities have housing specifically designed for the aging population. Where senior friendly housing is available, it is often in short supply. Many participants reported they live in homes that have stairs and were built several decades ago.

Home assessments and subsequent modifications are important to create a safe home environment that prevents falls. Examples of home modifications include fixing broken stairs, securing handrails, and installing grab bars in a bathroom.

A common theme in the focus group discussion is the lack of contractors or supplies to do home modifications to prevent a fall. Commonly, people living in smaller communities have to rely on family and friends to make the modifications. Participants noted that family support was not available to everyone. In some communities, the modifications increased the risk of falls due to improper installation of such things as ramps. The participants in the largest community in the North, Prince George, had made some improvements to their homes and did not find difficulty in hiring a contractor to complete them.

When exploring the topic of community spaces that impact falls risk, a participant shared that Mackenzie was an [Instant Town](#) that was “built by and for the young and able community.” A long-term resident of Mackenzie shared that when the community was first established, “you didn’t see many people over the age of 40 and if you did, they were just visiting.” Participants noted older adults now often choose to stay in Mackenzie after they retire and therefore need housing and services to support healthy aging. Participants also highlighted the District of Mackenzie is working towards making public spaces more accessible.



Some communities had few or no sidewalks. When sidewalks were present, participants often commented they felt walking on them increased their risk for falls due to large cracks and disrepair. Many communities are completing sidewalk repairs to improve safety. Adequate street lighting is also important to participants as long, dark winter nights impact their desire to walk outside in the winter.

## Physical activity

Physical activity is important for healthy aging. Strength and balance exercises are proven to prevent falls.

Many participants shared that they enjoy outdoor physical activities such as walking (in town and on trails), yardwork, lawn bowling, biking, and golfing.

The availability of organized programs to support physical activity vary by community. Some communities have strength and balance exercise programs, such as Tai Chi, which is proven to support falls prevention. Other communities have recreation centres with gyms, a pool and senior specific programming.

When asked about participation in a virtual exercise program, very few participants expressed interest. The focus group participants in Granisle shared they used to screen exercise videos at the seniors' centre for group exercise. However, following the pandemic the sessions are no longer running.





## Communication channels

NH is interested to learn more about where to promote community events and how older adults would like to receive health information. As such, the focus group participants were asked where they typically look to get health information.

Focus group participants prefer to receive health information or learn about events in person. There are some participants who use computers and shared that Facebook is a commonly used platform to learn about community events. Suggestions for sharing health information or events included promotion through local organizations including newsletters and bulletin boards, community radio or television, and local newspapers where available.

# Municipalities and Community Plans

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Municipalities support the health of their community members in a variety of ways. Healthy aging and falls prevention often align with community strategies such as active transportation plans, and age-friendly initiatives. Visit the following municipal webpages to learn more about each community:

- [Village of Granisle](#)
- [District of Mackenzie](#)
- [City of Quesnel](#)
- [Lake Babine Nation - Tachet](#)
- [The Village of Valemount](#)
- [City of Prince George](#)





# 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](#).



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<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

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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

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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 Northern Interior ranged from 5 to 24 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.

# GRANISLE

Date of focus group: April 18, 2023

## What we heard

### What are the healthy aging supports?

- Granisle is a socially active community with many groups and clubs for older adults to join.
- The local curling club has installed an elevator to make the community space more accessible.
- A subsidized shuttle brings residents to nearby communities weekly for various reasons, including grocery shopping and appointments with an optometrist.
- Community organizations and programming are available and key highlights include the Community Paramedics, Better at Home program and resources at the library.
- The local park has a rubberized walking path to provide a safe place to walk comfortably.

### What are the healthy aging challenges?

- Snow and ice in the winter pose an increased risk of falls, particularly with heavy snow falling from roofs and challenges finding people to clear it.
- Many homes in Granisle are multi-level with stairs posing a challenge for older adults.
- Contractors are in very short supply and are needed to make homes safer and prevent falls.
- Strength and balance exercise programs were in place before the pandemic (like Tai Chi) but are currently not available.
- Travel to a neighboring community is required to access services such as an Optometrist.

## **MACKENZIE**

Date of focus group: April 21, 2023

### **What we heard**

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

- Snow removal on the streets and sidewalks is prioritized by the community.
- The public library lends equipment such as hiking poles and snowshoes to enable outdoor physical activity.
- Subsidies exist for older adults to access the local recreation centre facilities.
- A taxi service is available with subsidies for those who require it.
- Many programs are available to support older adults such as meal delivery programs, community phone trees in case of emergencies, and exercise classes hosted by a kinesiologist.
- The recreation centre weight room is used frequently.
- A strong sense of community is present where neighbours often support one another with tasks such as snow removal and driveway graveling.

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

- Travel to other communities is required to access services such as optometry.
- Maintaining a large volunteer pool is challenging.
- Home modifications to prevent a fall are difficult to complete due to lack of skilled tradespeople available to make the upgrades. Materials needed to do the modifications may need to be sourced from outside Mackenzie.
- Many homes are older and have stairs which may be difficult for older adults to navigate.
- Several physical activity programs have stopped over the pandemic.

## PRINCE GEORGE

Date of focus group: September 11, 2023

### What we heard

#### What are the healthy aging supports?

- Older adults enjoy a variety of physical activities including fitness classes at the YMCA, classes at the pool, golf, line dancing, Tai Chi classes and walking groups.
- Some older adults have modified their homes to prevent a fall and have hired local contractors to do the modifications.
- Local public transportation is available to support older adults who do not drive.
- Improvements have been made to downtown sidewalks and streets in Prince George that encourage older adults to walk as a form of transportation.
- Many older adults have made their homes safer by removing tripping hazards such as small rugs and improved lighting.

#### What are the healthy aging challenges?

- Winter climate increases the risk of a fall due to icy conditions and long dark nights that decrease visibility.
- While many improvements to sidewalks have been completed, they have not been attended to across the entire community. Sidewalks in disrepair or non-existent make it a challenge for older adults to walk in the community.
- Snow removal on driveways and walkways is a challenge for older adults and hiring someone to clear snow is costly.
- Housing that is easy for seniors to age in place is in limited supply.

## QUESNEL

Date of focus group: April 20, 2023

### What we heard

#### What are the healthy aging supports?

- There are many organizations in Quesnel that support healthy aging such as a seniors' centre and the Better at Home program.
- Quesnel has a public transit system, including a handyDART for older adults who do not drive.
- There are many physical activities available to participate in such as biking, yoga, walking programs, yard work, Tai Chi, golfing, and 80+ seniors' groups.
- The recreation centre provides a space for indoor physical activities.
- Community members shared experiences of doing home modifications for themselves and others.
- [The City of Quesnel has been designated as a BC Age-Friendly Community.](#)

#### What are the healthy aging challenges?

- Participants shared that the number of classes /programs to support healthy aging has decreased considerably through the pandemic.
- Large rural properties that require outdoor maintenance are challenging for some older adults.
- Ice and snow in the winter pose a risk for falls. Additionally, the gravel used on the ice poses a falls risk in the spring once the snow has melted.



# TACHET – LAKE BABINE NATION

Date of focus group: June 14, 2023

## What we heard

### What are the healthy aging supports?

- Tachet Elders are enrolled in the TELUS Mobility Go program which uses devices to monitor for falls.
- A community garden is in place, inviting Elders to garden.
- The community health centre has a regular newsletter to share activities and events with community members.
- Ramps have been installed in the community to support accessibility.
- Mobility aids are available for Elders to use.
- Tachet has a 30km/hr. speed limit which encourages Elders to safely walk in the community.

### What are the healthy aging challenges?

- Wood heat is common in Tachet, chopping and moving wood can pose a risk for falls.
- Many homes have stairs which may be challenging for Elders to navigate.
- The community health centre along with the community paramedic program supports Elders.
- Transportation outside of community is required to access healthcare services such as optometry.
- The dock into Lake Babine is not accessible, which makes it difficult for those with mobility challenges.
- The community roads are gravel which poses a challenge for Elders with mobility aids.

## VALEMOUNT

Date of focus group: June 14, 2023

### What we heard

#### What are the healthy aging supports?

- A shuttle serves those in the community who have mobility aids such as wheelchairs.
- Yoga classes are available at the seniors' centre.
- The community has multiple benches downtown to give people a place to rest while walking.
- Programs such as Meals on Wheels and the Better at Home program help older adults maintain their independence.
- Men's Sheds are being organized to support men in the community.

#### What are the healthy aging challenges?

- Many homes in Valemount use wood heat. Cutting and carrying wood has resulted in falls in the community.
- Many homes have stairs that may be difficult for older adults to navigate.
- There are few contractors to make home modifications to make homes safer and prevent falls.
- Travel is needed to nearby communities to access services such as an optometrist.
- Strength and balance exercise programming for older adults is not currently available.
- Winter conditions were highlighted as a particular risk for falls, as snow and ice accumulate and make navigating the community difficult.



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