

# Physical Therapists' Attitudes/Beliefs and Current Practices Regarding Implementation of Falls Prevention Strategies in Older Adults

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## Abstract.

Identifying members of the elderly population who are at risk for falls is a vital concern in today's society. Physical therapists can help modify fall risk factors among this population. Purpose: Evaluate attitudes, beliefs, and current practices of Kansas Physical Therapists (PTs) regarding fall prevention strategies in older adults. Results: More than 69% of PTs believe falls in older adults are a significant public health problem, and screening for fall risks should be routinely incorporated. The majority of PTs agreed it was their professional responsibility to routinely ask about medications and vision screening, but did not practice that way. Conclusions: A discrepancy exists between what PTs view as their professional responsibility and how they currently practice.

## 1. Introduction

Identifying members of the elderly population who are at risk for falling is a vital concern in today's society [1, 2]. Nearly 23 million Americans are over the age of 65 [3]. Statistics show that over 35% of this population experiences one or more falls each year [3, 4]. Falls are the leading cause of fatal and nonfatal injuries in individuals over 65 years of age [3, 4]. Consequences of nonfatal falls include decreased mobility, increased dependence on others, and premature death [3, 4]. Research which investigated the most likely cause or causes of falls found them to be multi-factorial [5, 1].

The purpose of this study was to explore the attitudes/beliefs and current practices of physical therapists on several dimensions regarding fall prevention in older adults. No previous study was found that investigated this specific population or topic. The results may be used to identify areas where gaps exist between attitudes/beliefs and practices. These results could be used to develop continuing education courses addressing appropriate fall prevention interventions and pre and post fall assessment guidelines and techniques for practicing physical therapists.

## 2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

Prospective, descriptive, non-experiential research techniques were utilized. A list of practicing physical therapists in Kansas was obtained through the Kansas Board of Healing Arts. Surveys were sent to physical therapists practicing and residing in the state of Kansas (n = 1,575). The return rate was 23%.

Respondent demographics obtained from the surveys can be found in Tables 1 and 2.

Table: 1

Gender Demographics of Respondents

Gender	Percent
Female	80.1
Male	19.9

Table: 2

Practice Setting Demographics of Respondents

Practice Setting	Percent
Private Practice	21.4
Outpatient	24.4
Acute Care	13.0
Home Health	12.2
School System	5.7
Skilled Nursing & Sub-acute	11.1
Other	12.2

Of the respondents, 98.9% indicated that they believe that falls are a significant public health problem in older adults, and 94.5% indicated that most falls in older adults are preventable. The majority also indicated (96.7%) that screening for fall risks should be as routine as screening for other medical problems such as cancer, high cholesterol, and diabetes.

Responses to the survey indicated that approximately 99.7% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that it was their professional responsibility to routinely ask their patients about recent and past falls. They also indicated that they felt it was their professional responsibility to routinely ask older adult patients about their medications (90.1%), vision screenings (84%), exercise habits (99.5%), strength and balance exercise programs (98.6%), and home safety evaluations (92.9%).

Regarding PTs' current practices addressing fall prevention in older patients, approximately 90% frequently or always asked their patients about: recent and past falls, exercise habits, and recommended strength and balance exercise program. However, only 35% frequently reviewed medications with a focus on fall prevention with their older patients and only 22% ask about vision screening/evaluations. Only 51% frequently or always recommend a home safety evaluation for their older patients.

### **3. Conclusions**

A discrepancy exists between what PTs view as their professional responsibility and how they currently practice with respect to medication reviews, vision screening, and home safety evaluations. While they believe it is their professional responsibility to routinely address medications, vision screenings, and home safety evaluations, they are not routinely doing this in practice. Areas where beliefs and current practice habits show consistency include routinely asking about recent and past falls, asking about exercise habits, and recommending strength and balance exercise programs. Further research is needed to investigate the differences between what PT's view as their professional responsibilities and how they currently practice with respect to fall prevention in older adult patients.

### **References**

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