June 2024

Balancing Act: A review of physical activity in falls prevention

Short summary of the evidence about the effectiveness of physical activity for falls prevention – and so what for local Age UKs?

Supporting older people to participate in balanced focused exercise in ways that will help to prevent falls

Evidence based falls prevention exercise check list

To be effective (and evidence-based) in reducing falls, exercise-based classes and initiatives must: Support and motivate older people to do sufficiently challenging balance and functional exercises (involving standing balance training) alone or in combination with strength exercises or Tai Chi **two to three times / three hours per week for a minimum of six months for short term improvement, but ideally on-going for continued improvement.**

Involve appropriately trained instructors who can:

- assess a person's functional ability to establish the suitability for a given class / activity
- tailor and make ongoing adjustments to an individual's needs to ensure that each older person within a class / activity is exercising at the required intensity and progressing in ways that are safe.

Support and motivate older people to do balance focused exercise independently in ways that are safe and effective. Resources might prevent the delivery of more than one instructor-led-session per week and not all older people can or will choose to join supervised classes three times a week on an ongoing basis. And so, getting the right dose of sessions / bouts of balance-focused exercise each week will be reliant on people exercising independently.

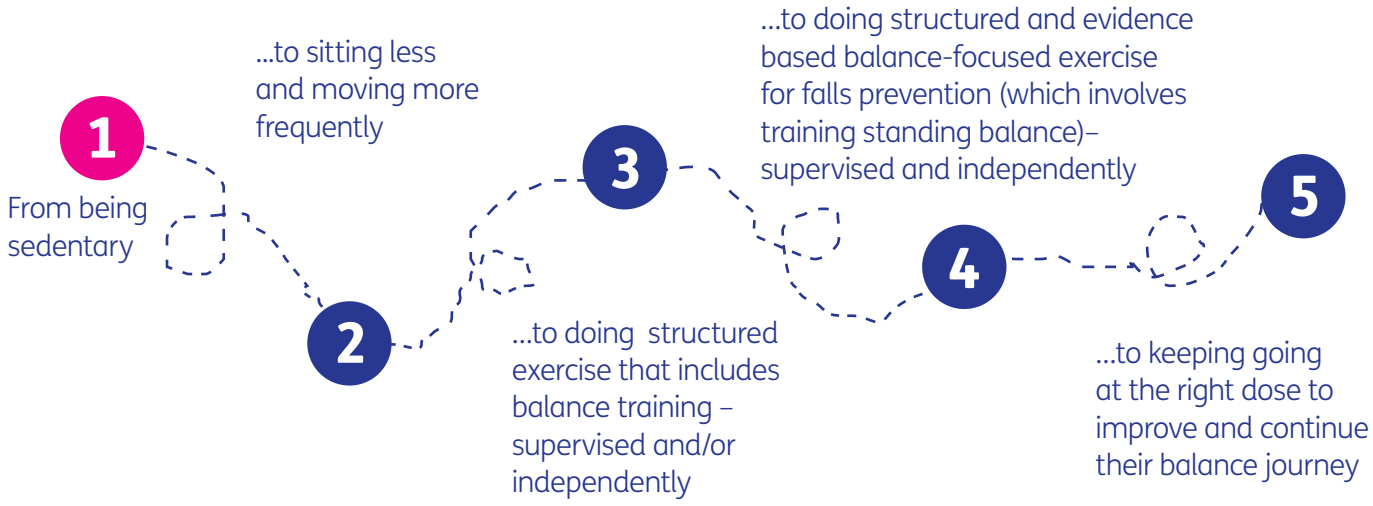
The messages from the evidence base are clear:

- **What you do and the way that you do it are equally important when it comes to supporting older people to reduce falls.** Interventions that do not include the three elements included in the checklist will not be effective in helping older people to reduce falls in the short and long term, even though it will benefit older people in other ways.
- It's not a case of build it [a great evidence-based falls prevention exercise intervention] and they will come – falls prevention can not be be done to older people; they themselves must engage and take action.
- Each person's motivations for and capabilities to engage, and their entry points to exercise-based falls prevention will vary and will be influenced by where they are on their **physical activity journey.**
- Local Age UKs support people across multiple stages of their physical activity journey. Whether and how local Age UK's deliver evidence-based falls prevent exercise interventions, in addition to classes activities that include balance-focused exercise more generally, will depend on their strategic priorities and capabilities and the resources and funding available – as well as the local landscape and context.

Supporting older people to prevent falls across their physical activity journey

Activities and classes that support older people across any of the five stages can help them to live well and benefit from the wider health and wellbeing outcomes associated with being physically active and moving more, even if there is little or no impact on falls prevention

The stage of older person's physical activity journey*



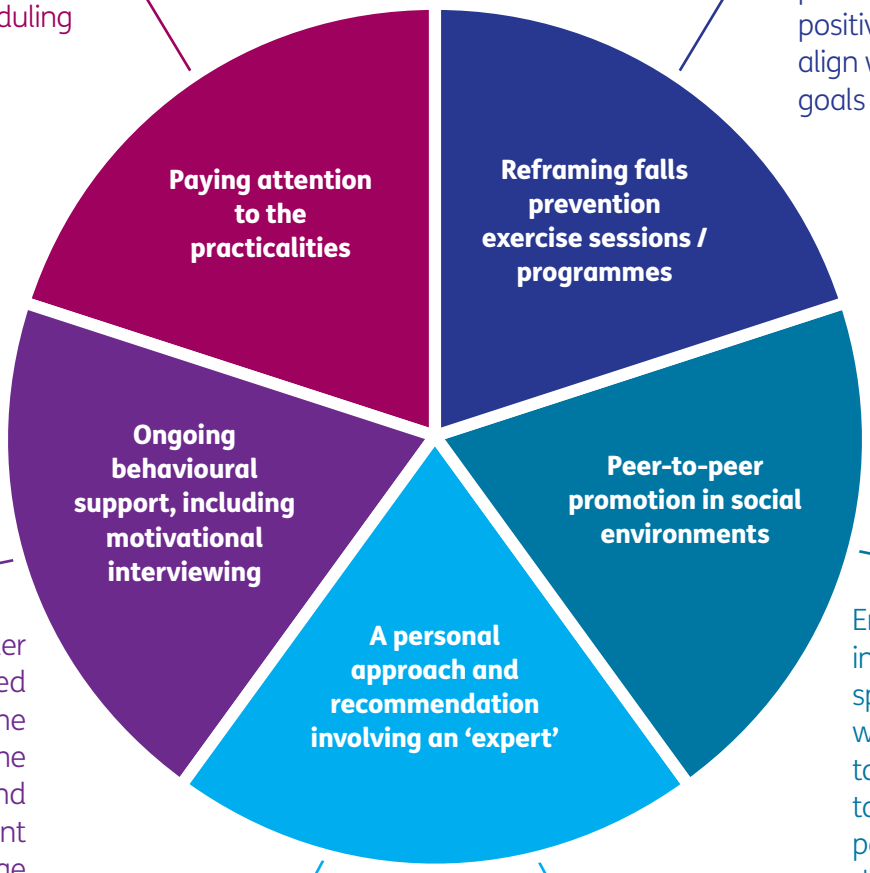
Classes and activities that support older people to engage in this type of exercise can help them to:

- **Build their confidence and ability to practice balanced focused exercises safely and effectively**
- **Improve balance (or aspects of balance)**

Classes and activities that support older people to engage in this type of exercise can help to reduce falls

*This diagram captures a person's journey rather than their experience – most older people will not experience a linear journey and instead move back and forth across the different stages.

Effective practice in supporting older people to engage in exercise-based falls prevention – and to stick with it



Ensuring that activities are accessible – in terms of location, transport, cost and scheduling

Moving from an emphasis on ageing, falling and falls prevention to focusing on positive messages that align with older people's goals for living well

To ensure that older people are supported during the programme and have the information and encouragement they need to engage consistently

Engaging older people in the community spaces and places where they come together with peers to help to promote peer-to-peer positive dialogue about falls prevention

Discussing exercise with a trusted professional, particularly a health or social care professional, to encourage participation in ways that will be safe for the individual – particularly if concerns about pain, injury and illness are preventing someone from exercising

Understanding and responding to a person's goals and needs and preferences for engaging in exercises that can help to prevent falls

Effective practice in implementing established evidence based-falls prevention programmes

Effective practice in implementing FaME and Otago programmes

Otago and FaME are popular evidence-based falls prevention programmes. Ensuring that these programmes are implemented as intended is key to their effectiveness. A growing body of evidence highlights that changing or cutting elements in the following ways moves implementation away from effective practice – and so reduces the programme's impact on falls prevention.

The average duration of the programme is less than six months, and at frequency of only once per week, and in the Otago programme no home visits are included

The exercises include only a limited amount of standing balance training (standing balance training does include using the chair as a support while standing for those who need it)

The exercises include little or no strength challenge and limited progression across the course of the programme

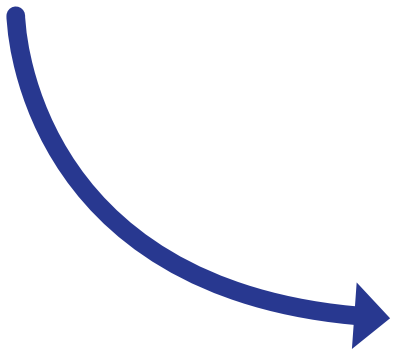
In FaME, there is no floor work to develop skills in getting up off the floor (for FaME) – which is key element of the programme that helps to reduce fear and increase confidence

The trainer is not suitably qualified, i.e., does not have a level 4 postural stability or an Otago leader qualification. This means that trainer does not have the skills needed to assess a person's functional fitness and suitability for a given class; or to do the ongoing tailoring of exercises that is needed to ensure that each older people is exercising at the right intensity and progressing safely throughout

Suggested actions for local Age UKs

2 key actions

1. Assess whether current activities and classes that are promoted as supporting falls prevention are consistent with evidence-based practice by checking the activities.
2. Plot current physical activity and falls prevention offers against the physical activity journey.



To help you to:

- ✓ identify any gaps in your offer.
- ✓ make decisions about whether and how your offer could be developed in order to be consistent with evidence-based practice.
- ✓ focus on what your local Age UK can support directly via the delivery of classes and programmes or indirectly by signposting and connecting older people to other offers. This could also involve developing local falls prevention partnerships.
- ✓ articulate what you do and the associated benefits for older people. Supporting older people to engage in balance-focused exercise activities that do not meet the checklist still has many benefits even though it won't on its own be effective in preventing falls; these benefits include:

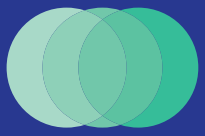
- Helping older people to improve their balance and to get the dose of exercise needed to help reduce falls
- enable older people to experience the wider health and wellbeing benefits associated with be physically active and moving more.

Further support and information

- You can ask for help and support from the Service Development and Improvement Team at Age UK, email Service.Design1@ageuk.org.uk
- See the more detailed summary of this report for more information about the evidence base and what supporting older people at different stages of the physical activity journey can look like – and the associated benefits for older people.
- Raising the Bar booklet and full report is focused on community-based strength and balance programmes for older people and includes examples of delivery models and effective practice in delivering programmes to reduce falls.

This evidence review was commissioned by Age UK and undertaken by Dr Yvonne Fullwood at Understanding Value Ltd.

The review was undertaken to support the delivery of evidence-based falls prevention interventions and services across the Age UK Network.



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