

Abstract citation ID: ckae144.2099

Fall risk factors and prevention among older adults in primary care in Belgium, 2019-2021

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Background: Falls are a major public health problem and ageing populations further increase the burden of fall-induced injuries. Falling among older persons is a multifactorial health condition needing multifactorial care. General practitioners (GPs) are well placed to implement a multifactorial management. A surveillance study of accidental falls studied characteristics of falls, risk groups and fall risk factors as well as fall prevention by GPs.

Methods: A 3-year retrospective population-based study by the Belgian network of Sentinel General Practitioners (SGP) on all patients aged ≥ 65 years consulting their GP for new fall-related injuries.

Descriptive statistics were used to characterize falls, fallers, fall risks and preventive measures. Logistic regression analyses were performed to identify factors associated with a multifactorial fall risk profile.

Results: During 2019-21, 1138 accidental falls were registered. Medical and/or nursing intervention was required for 24% and 22% had a severe injury. During consult, 30% was referred to hospital. 61% of patients showed at least one of the four most prevalent fall risks, i.e. deficits of mobility or balance, polypharmacy, cognitive impairment or psychotropic medication. A multifactorial fall risk profile was observed in 45% of fallers and was associated with recurrent falling ($p < 0.001$), fall location ($p < 0.05$), activity when falling ($p < 0.01$) and pandemic year 2020 ($p < 0.05$). Addressing surrounding and walking problems were the most frequently delivered preventive measures. For 28% of patients, other primary care providers (mainly nurse and physiotherapist) were involved in preventive care.

Conclusions: This study highlights the importance of identifying fall risk factors among fallers in primary care. Preventive fall measures, taken in about one in four general practice patients in collaboration with other healthcare providers, are crucial for preventing accidental falls in older persons in Belgium.

Key messages:

- A multifactorial management of fall risk factors by GPs is crucial for preventing accidental falls in older primary care patients.
- Strengthening collaboration between primary healthcare professionals is needed for improving fall prevention in Belgium.