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Listener, New Zealand

06 Dec 2014, by Ruth Nichol

General News, page 50 - 1,593.00 cm<sup>2</sup>

Magazines Lifestyle - circulation 52,113 (-----S-)

ID 348287204



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# ThisLife



**HEALTH**  
by Ruth Nichol

## Falling into line

Simple low-cost home modifications could reduce our high rate of fall-related hospital admissions.

**M**ost of us would probably agree that from a safety point of view, having slip-resistant surfaces on decks and handrails for internal stairs and outside steps makes sense. So does decent outside lighting – better safe than sorry.

But what about grab-rails in our showers and toilets, and slip-resistant bath mats? And do we really need high-visibility, slip-resistant edging on outside steps? These might be prudent safety measures in the homes of elderly people who are at risk of falling, or younger people living with a disability, but are they really going to do much for healthy young and middle-aged adults?

The answer, it seems, is yes, they are. Falls are

more common than we realise, including those among the younger age groups not traditionally seen as being at risk of them. And according to a recent study by researchers at the University of Otago, simple low-cost modifications such as installing handrails for stairs and steps and grab-rails in bathrooms can reduce falls in the home by a quarter. Given that each year, falls in and around the home cause around half a million injuries requiring medical treatment, that represents a significant potential reduction in treatment costs and in personal suffering.

The study involved modifying 436 houses to make them safer, then comparing the number of ACC claims made by the occupants for fall-related injuries with the number made by the occupants of 406 unmodified houses. The rate of injuries in the first group was 26% lower than in the second. The most commonly modified areas were outside steps and bathrooms, and the average cost was \$564.

Michael Keall, who led the study by the university's housing and health research programme, says falls are a major burden on the health system. "Between 200 and 250 people die



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## "You're 12 times more likely to fall at home if you've had three or more drinks in the previous six hours than if you haven't been drinking."

The risk of falling increases as we get older. However, there is growing evidence that we become more fall-prone long before the official "danger age" of 65. Research carried out by University of Auckland falls specialist Bridget Kool suggests the risk starts to increase from age 45. "It seems to be linked to the fact that by our mid-40s we're often less physically fit and are starting to slow down." According to her research on falls at home among young and middle-aged adults, just over a third requiring hospital treatment take place on stairs, and just under a third take place on a flat surface. Another 11% involve falling from ladders or scaffolding.

As with road accidents, falls are linked to drinking alcohol. "You're 12 times more likely to fall at home if you've had three or more drinks in the previous six hours than if you haven't been drinking," says Kool.

Fall prevention programmes are now common around the world, with most focusing on trying to change people's behaviour. This has limitations given many people are not even aware they are at risk of falling.

According to Keall, the results of the University of Otago study have attracted international attention since they were published in the *Lancet* in September because they prove, for the first time, that it is possible to reduce falls in the home by changing people's environment, rather than trying to change their behaviour.

He believes the findings are strong enough to justify a Government-funded home-modification programme similar to the Heat Smart programme, in which 235,000 homes were insulated between 2009 and 2013.

He's not holding his breath, though: "The evidence is pretty compelling – funding these kinds of modifications would produce definite cost savings, and they would benefit society more generally. But a bit more water probably needs to go under the bridge before anything happens." ■

from accidents in their homes every year, a good part of which are falls."

Thousands more are admitted to hospital because of falls. In 2012, for example, there were 21,500 fall-related hospital admissions, compared with 3745 admissions following road crashes.

**T**he long-term impact of falls is also serious. "When you take into account the pain and suffering, and things like disability and lost income, the effect of injuries from falls is very similar to injuries from road accidents," says Keall.

### HEALTH BRIEFS

#### ANTIBIOTICS AND OBESITY

Children whose mothers take antibiotics during the second and third trimesters of pregnancy are 84% more likely to be obese by the age of seven than those whose mothers don't, according to researchers at Columbia University. The finding supports growing evidence as to the importance of certain colon bacteria in maintaining health and how imbalances may cause conditions such as obesity.

#### COLOURFUL TRAINING

Adults can be trained to "see" letters as colours in the same way that people with synaesthesia experience the world – and gain IQ points in the process. Although the effects are short-lived, psychologists from the UK's University of Sussex say similar training could one day be used to support mental function in people with conditions such as ADHD and early-stage dementia.

#### A TASTE OF GOOD HEALTH

Adding herbs and spices to your food doesn't just make it taste good, but may also help protect against heart disease. Researchers at Penn State University found that adding two tablespoons of high-antioxidant culinary spices to the meals of overweight but otherwise healthy men increased the antioxidant activity in their blood by 13%. This may help prevent cardiovascular disease and other chronic diseases.

DECEMBER 6 2014 [www.listener.co.nz](http://www.listener.co.nz)