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Falls Prevention in Red Lake and Atikokan

Sometimes, the smallest things can make the biggest difference, as two small towns in Northwestern Ontario discovered in their attempts to reduce falls among the elderly. For Atikokan, it was about no-nonsense prevention and education – in the home.

For Red Lake, it was about innovative yet practical strategies – in the hospital.

Bob Botham heads up the Falls Prevention Team in Atikokan, which consists of a nurse, occupational therapist, pharmacist, dietician, home support coordinator and a community counsellor.

“We’ve been able to identify risks right in someone’s home before they potentially get hurt,” says Botham, a community mental health worker with the Atikokan Family Health Team. He says they’ll even go into someone’s home to tape down slippery carpet, or replace hard-to-reach burnt-out light bulbs.

“This is a small community and we’re really good at working together,” he says. Red Lake’s Margaret Cochenour Memorial Hospital has reduced the number of falls by 57 percent using colour-coded leaves and non-slip socks.

A red, yellow or green paper leaf above each patient’s bed lets staff know who is at a high risk of falling, says physiotherapist Tracy Vilks.

All patients receive non-slip socks if they don’t have proper footwear, regardless of age or physical condition. And the hospital replaced a smaller, less steady step stool with a large exercise stepper for people to use to climb onto the emergency department examining table. “We assessed when falls were happening, where and at what time of day,” Vilks explains. “We found that a large number were happening around bathroom visits and at two key times of day – during shift changes and at lunch time.”

She sees the results of a fall first-hand in her role as the hospital’s physiotherapist.

“Often people who have a fall end up never being able to go home. It can be hard to get them mobile again,” she says. “If we can help keep people from falling, it’s good for everyone.”