

Information for patients from JNNP

Risk of falls for people with muscular dystrophy

People with a common form of muscular dystrophy are much more likely to be injured by falling over than other people. Their medical care should include an assessment of their home to see if improvements can be made that will reduce their risk of falls.

What do we know already?

Facioscapulohumeral disease is the third most common type of inherited muscular dystrophy. People with this disease, called FSHD for short, experience worsening muscle weakness, which usually starts around the face, shoulder blades, and arms. But it may progress to the rest of the body, making people vulnerable to falls.

This new study looked at how common falls were in people with FSHD, compared with people the same age and sex who didn't have the disease. It also looked at how likely people were to injure themselves, how advanced their disease was, and what types of falls they had.

What does the new study say?

One in three people with FSHD said they fell at least once a month. None of the people in the comparison group fell this often. Worryingly, almost 7 in 10 people who fell often were injured in the fall. Most people fell at home. Unsurprisingly, people who fell more often were likely to have worse muscle weakness and to be less stable, for example finding it hard to hold their body stable while climbing stairs or getting up from a chair.

How reliable are the findings?

The study looked at 73 people with FSHD and, as a comparison group, 49 people without. Although the study is fairly small, the results should be reliable.

Where does the study come from?

The study was done by researchers from the Netherlands and Switzerland.

What does this mean for me?

If you have this type of muscular dystrophy, or if you care for someone who does, you need to be aware that falls are a risk as the condition worsens.

Falls can cause serious injuries, such as broken bones and head injuries, so it's important to avoid them if possible.

What should I do now?

If you are concerned, ask your doctor if you can have a home visit from an occupational therapist or physiotherapist to assess your risk of falls, and what can be done to avoid them. These professionals can check your home for hazards and help you get aids like grab bars that may help you avoid falling.

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Epidemiology and pathophysiology of falls in facioscapulohumeral disease by Horlings CGC, Munneke M, Bickerstaffe A, *et al.* *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery, and Psychiatry*. 2009;**80**:1357–1363. <http://jnnp.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/80/12/1357>

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