

Research Spotlight

Do outdoor falls impact all age groups equally?



A 5-year analysis of Public Liability personal injury claims and awards related to falls on roadways/ footpaths between 2019-2023

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Our Research Spotlights aim to provide concise summaries of specific thematic areas from our published research reports, highlighting findings that may be of particular interest to readers. These spotlights are designed to be easily understood and accessible to all, especially those interested in personal injury data and accident prevention research. In this edition, we focus on the unique patterns and severity of injuries sustained due to outdoor falls among adults aged 65 years and older.

Introduction

Falls among older adults are a significant public health concern, with research estimating that 1 in 3 people aged over 65 years fall each year, with an estimated economic cost of approx. €400 million in Ireland¹. To date, a large body of research has focused on the identification and targeting of risk factors of falls which are related to the individual such as underlying diseases and strategies to optimise bone strength and protection. Few studies, however, have identified the wider environmental factors which contribute to outdoor falls, all of which are modifiable. This research aimed to identify hazards on roadways and footpaths which were reported to cause outdoor falls in personal injury claims and specifically, to explore the impact of outdoor falls on older adults, including the type and severity of injuries sustained.

Data and Methods

This study utilised personal injury data collected by the Injuries Resolution Board, the independent State body responsible for the assessment and mediation of personal injury claims in Ireland. The data comprised 6,031 personal injury claims submitted between 2019 and 2023 for injuries sustained due to outdoor falls and 437 assessments of compensation made by the Injuries Resolution Board in 2023.

A medical report is generally required as part of the compensation assessment process. These reports were examined to identify the specific cause of each accident, as reported by the injured party. In determining the appropriate level of compensation, the Injuries Resolution Board assesses the Dominant/Most Significant injury sustained. This injury, representing the most prominent injury in most cases, was utilised in the analyses included in this report. Demographic characteristics, such as age at the time of the accident, were extracted from the Injuries Resolution Board's claim database. All data relates to claims submitted to, or compensation assessments made by the Injuries Resolution Board, between January 1, 2023, and December 31, 2023, for injuries sustained as a result of falls on footpaths and roadways.

¹ Strategy to prevent Falls and Fractures in Ireland's Ageing Population report, 2008.

Results

Adults aged 65 years and older:

15%

2022 Census
Population

31%

Outdoor Fall
Accident Claims
2019 - 2023

€3.1M

Outdoor Fall
Accident
Compensation
2023

1 in 2

Accidents
Caused by
Uneven
Footpaths

60%

Sustain
moderate to
severe injuries

Incidence of Outdoor Falls

Between 2019 and 2023, adults aged over 65 years accounted for over 1,800 claims attributed to outdoor falls. Although this age group represented 15% of the Irish population in 2022², they accounted for 31% of claims related to outdoor falls during 2019-2023. Notably, over three-quarters of these claims (76%) involved females. In 2023 alone, personal injury compensation awarded for outdoor falls among adults aged 65 years and over totalled €3.1 million.

Environmental Risk Factors of Outdoor Falls

Among these assessments of compensation made in 2023, over half (53%) of all outdoor pedestrian falls among adults aged 65 years and over were caused by uneven footpaths. In contrast, uneven footpaths were responsible for only 20% of outdoor falls among the youngest age group (18-29 years), highlighting the increased risk that uneven walkways present to older adults.

Type and Severity of Injuries Sustained in Outdoor Falls

The analysis revealed a clear age gradient in the types of injuries sustained. Outdoor falls among older adults typically resulted in upper-body injuries, such as shoulder (18%), and facial injuries (14%). Conversely, younger adults (18-29 years) generally sustained lower limb injuries, such as ankle (33%) and knee injuries (10%).

These findings may be influenced by the different environmental hazards encountered by each age group and variations in the mechanisms of falls. The higher prevalence of upper limb injuries among older adults may be due to the use of arms and hands to break a fall, while younger individuals may twist or bend their lower limbs.

In addition to differences in injury patterns, older adults were more likely to sustain injuries of greater severity compared to younger adults. Among the most common injury types, 60% of awards for outdoor falls among the over-65 age group were for moderate or severe injuries, compared to just 20% of awards among the youngest group.

Conclusion

This research highlights the significant impact of outdoor falls on older adults, emphasising the need for targeted interventions to address environmental hazards such as uneven footpaths which account for over half of all fall-related accidents. Furthermore, the findings highlight that outdoor falls disproportionately affect older adults, often resulting in moderate to severe injuries. By focusing on modifiable environmental risk factors, we can reduce the incidence and severity of falls, ultimately improving safety and quality of life for older individuals.

² Key Findings Population and Migration Estimates, April 2022 - Central Statistics Office.



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