

Fall Prevention: Empowering People Through Online Education

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THE INNOVATION

A Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) was developed to empower people about falls and fall prevention. A MOOC is a free, open-access educational resource available to anyone in the world who has access to the Internet.

The older population is expanding rapidly.¹ The prevalence of falls increases with age, occurring in 1 in 2 people aged over 80 years.² Falls are associated with significant morbidity, mortality, and health care costs.³

WHO & WHERE

The Aging Well: Falls MOOC is hosted by an online digital education platform (FutureLearn, <https://www.futurelearn.com>). The course was developed with clinicians, academics and older people (Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, UK; Newcastle University, UK; and Voice North, an organization through which the public can be consulted). Throughout its development, older people piloted the course to ensure relevance and a focus on practical information. The course was not promoted heavily other than on Twitter and in flyers that were mailed to older persons, support groups, and charities.

HOW

Aging Well: Falls is an annual, 4-week course aimed at empowering people to take action to prevent falls in themselves or in others. Week 1 covers the basic science and background to

Conflicts of interest: Participants who completed the free online course described here could obtain an optional certificate of completion for a small fee. This was purchased by 134 learners (0.04%). The income generated from the certificate fees was divided between FutureLearn and Newcastle University.

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falls, week 2 explores risk factors, week 3 focuses on action to take following a fall, and the final week is devoted to prevention strategies.

Learners are encouraged to participate through online discussion, sharing of experiences, and peer education. Content is provided through videos, articles, animations, audio, discussion boards, and quizzes. A team of clinicians provides mentorship to encourage discussion, answers questions (without providing personalized advice), and monitors dialog.

LEARNING

In the first year of the course, 2014, 56% of learners completed the course.⁴ This is much higher than typical MOOC completion rates, which are less than 20%.⁵ Our learners were motivated by the offering of practical information, the focus on maintaining independence, and the relatively short duration of the course. Learners also appreciated interaction with experts/mentors on discussion boards.

A post-course survey was e-mailed 1 year after the end of the course; the response rate was 19% (274 of 1,442). Of respondents, 57% (156 of 274) felt much more confident to manage their falls risk, 38% (104 of 274) felt a little more confident, and 1% (3 of 274) felt no different.

Older people are motivated to use online education to maintain their independence. We frequently encounter the erroneous view that older people do not use the Internet. This is not the case.⁶

Given the prevalence of falls and the rapidly expanding older population, innovative, large-scale interventions such as this are urgently required. The development of MOOCs addressing other common public health concerns should be considered.

Key words: falls; Internet; education, patient; health promotion

Author affiliations and references are available at <http://www.AnnFamMed.org/content/15/5/482/suppl/DC1/>.