Health experts are urging people to look out for older or vulnerable people who could be at risk of falling this winter, to prevent them ending up in hospital.

Falls are the most common cause of accidental injury in older people and the most common cause of accidental death of people over the age of 75 in the UK.

Cambridge resident Monica Smith knows only too well the impact a fall can have on your confidence and independence after fracturing her wrist in a nasty fall last year which ended with her arm being put into a cast.

After this the 87-year-old was keen to receive help. She said: “Since my fall my confidence had dropped. Having poor eyesight and walking in public places was already a challenge which had become worse due to the fear of a fall again. After my fall, I did not think I could do anything. I thought falling was a normal part of getting older”

In February 2016 Mrs Smith was introduced to Everyone Health’s Falls Prevention Support Service which is funded by Cambridgeshire County Council. She began having sessions with one of the Service’s Health Trainers at East Barnwell Health Centre and she also started a Strength and Balance class, run by Forever Active, an organisation which offers exercise sessions to the over 50s.

In the sessions they discussed a range of topics around falling including how exercise could help prevent falls and these along with her exercise classes has led to her confidence in daily life increasing considerably.

“I could really start to feel steadier and it had definitely increased my confidence to go out,” she said. “I had previously not been into Cambridge without taking a taxi to where I wanted to go. So when I was able to travel into the city on the bus and take time to look around the shops, I was extremely pleased -something I had not done in many years. This then spurred me onto attending the Big Weekend in Cambridge. The previous year I had attended as a wheelchair user, this year I managed to walk around the event, due to my increased confidence and improved ability to move around.”

Along with gaining strength and confidence for getting around her sessions with the Health Trainer have also led to Mrs Smith making some positive changes to her diet including cutting out sugar from her tea, eating more green leafy vegetables and changed her breakfast from white bread and marmalade to oats and berries.

“If it had not been for meeting Ryan from Everyone Health then I would never have begun this journey, the support and
motivation he has given me has really helped me make positive changes in my lifestyle and help me to keep active and well as I get older”, she added. “My mum was still completing marathons at 90 years old and lived to the grand age of 101. With my new found health and wellbeing I plan to beat this!”

Every winter there are about 25,000 extra deaths caused by cold weather – and around 240 of these are in Cambridgeshire alone. As well as being careful while out and about on foot, there are a number of things which people can do in their homes to help them stay well in winter such as heating your home to at least 18°C and having a flu jab, which is free to older people and to those with ongoing poor health.

The County Council’s public health team is recommending some simple measures to help people stay safe and steady this winter.

Val Thomas, Consultant in Public Health at Cambridgeshire County Council, said: “It’s really important for older and more vulnerable people to take extra care in their homes and when they are out and about during the winter months. We want people to remain independent for as long as possible and avoid ending up in hospital or being looked after by social care services. There are some simple tips that can help prevent people keep well during the colder periods and importantly we are asking people if possible, to keep an eye on older or vulnerable relatives and neighbours to make sure they are keeping warm and well.”

Tips for staying steady on your feet, especially during winter

- Wear sturdy, well-fitting suitable shoes outdoors
- Ensure steps and paths are clear before you walk. Be especially careful if you see wet pavements that could be iced over
- If you feel unsteady avoid going out when icy
- Make sure rubber tips on the end of sticks have a good tread – when they wear smooth they can skid on wet surfaces and should be replaced.
- Wrap up warm outside and stay warm at home too as muscles work more efficiently when they are warm, helping to prevent falls. Set the living room temperature to 70°F or 21°C and the bedroom to 64°F or 18°C
- Make sure you have regular hot drinks during the day and get up and walk around indoors for a few minutes regularly if you can do this safely
- When you need to go outside wear shoes with slip resistant, good grip soles to prevent falls.
- Wear several layers of clothes rather than one chunky layer – clothes made from cotton, wool or fleecy fibres help to maintain body heat
- If indoors, keep your heating to the right temperature as heating your home to at least 18°C in winter poses minimal risk to your health when you are wearing suitable clothing.
For more information on how to stay well this winter visit: https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/be-well/resources-and-campaigns/stay-well-this-winter/