



**TO:** Alliance for Physical Therapy Quality and Innovation (APTQI)

**FR:** Morning Consult

**DT:** May 24, 2024

**RE:** Senior (65+) Survey on Fall Assessments & SAFE Act

*On behalf of the Alliance for Physical Therapy Quality and Innovation, Morning Consult conducted a nationwide survey of n=1,000 adults over 65 to understand to what extent seniors are concerned about accidental falls related to age, and their interest in government-provided programs to conduct fall risk assessments through Medicare.*

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Usually based on personal experience, older Americans express a clear concern about how age-related accidental falls can disrupt their daily lives. For many, concerns are not only centered on the potential for serious injury but also on how falls jeopardize future independence and ability to live at home.

As a result, there is support for physical and occupational therapy services that help mitigate and protect seniors from the threat of accidental falls. Seniors understand the important role physical therapists play in preserving seniors' mobility later in life, creating support for government protections, specifically for those providing services to Medicare beneficiaries.

Specifically, strong majorities of older Americans support (1) protections for physical therapists that would limit CMS from cutting pay, and (2) expanded access for Medicare beneficiaries to receive fall assessments delivered by physical and occupational therapists.

## **DETAILED FINDINGS: SENIORS SUPPORT FALL ASSESSMENT SERVICES FOR MEDICARE BENEFICIARIES**

### **Seniors are very favorable towards physical and occupational therapists.**

Seniors in the U.S. hold a favorable view of both physical and occupational therapists -- 89% of seniors have a favorable view of physical therapists and 79% are favorable towards occupational therapists. Favorability of these professions not only cuts across a broad group of seniors, but there is also strong intensity behind the positive sentiment -- 53% of seniors indicate they are "very favorable" of physical therapists.



Few seniors have negative views towards each occupation, as only 6% of seniors have an unfavorable view of both physical and occupational therapists.

Most of the positive views are driven by personal experience. 58% of seniors have personally been to a physical therapist previously.

### **Most seniors recognize the of value physical therapists in fall prevention.**

Seniors overwhelmingly recognize that physical and occupational therapists are “very important” for recovering from an injury (74% “very important”), recovering from a stroke (69%), and allowing seniors to live independently in their homes (68%).

However, in addition to recovery and independent living, seniors equally recognize that physical therapists are very important for “improving balance and preventing falls” (70% “very important”).

Those who have previously experienced a serious injury from an accidental fall are even more likely to indicate that physical and occupational therapists are essential for preventing falls, as 74% indicate they are “very important.”

### **Accidental falls are highly relevant to all seniors, based on personal experience.**

Accidental falls are a ubiquitous issue for seniors, which is likely influencing higher levels of concern about future falls. 42% of seniors have personal experience with a fall in their household, with 31% having personally experienced a fall.

The injuries sustained are often serious as well. Among those who had personal experience with a fall, 54% resulted in a need for medical care, 50% required a visit to the ER, 20% called an ambulance, 16% needed long-term hospitalization, and 18% required surgery. Stays at assisted living facilities are a rare consequence (6%) but do occur.

### **Future accidental falls are a clear concern for seniors, mainly due to concerns about maintaining their independence and ability to do daily activities.**

While only a quarter (29%) of seniors recognize accidental falls as a top three leading cause of death for others their age, there is still deep concern about experiencing a fall in the future. 81% of seniors are at least somewhat concerned about experiencing an accidental fall related to their age. This includes a third of seniors (29%) who are “very concerned.”



While there are many concerns regarding how an accidental fall may impact a senior's life, the underlying concern around accidental falls is driven by a reduction in one's ability to do daily activities (70% "very concerned"), recovery time (69%), and remain living at home (64%).

Other concerns about falls include a need for surgery (66%), hospitalization (64%), higher medical costs (63%), walker/wheelchair dependence (61%), a move to an assisted living facility (57%), and an increase in depression (55%).

**The potential CMS pay cuts for physical therapists treating Medicare patients are concerning to seniors, and there is strong support for stabilizing funding.**

After presenting background about the proposed pay cuts from CMS, seniors evaluated some potential downstream impacts. Most concerns about the pay cuts are centered on access, but specifically 61% are "very concerned" that the cuts will lead to a reduction in access to fall prevention services that may result in more seniors having to live in facility-based settings.

Other concerns include general access to services when needed (60% "very concerned"), access for rural communities (55%), needed alternatives to opioids (53%), and the recruitment of future physical therapists (49%).

As a result, seniors are clear this is a top issue for them. 44% of seniors indicate that stabilizing funding for physical therapists in Medicare is a "top priority" for Congress to address this year, while 90% consider it at least "important" to address. Among those who have had a serious injury from a fall, 47% indicate it is a top priority.

Support for congressional action is high among seniors. 85% support long-term reform that would stabilize funding for physical and occupational therapy services, including 59% who "strongly support" the initiative. While the intensity of support is higher among Democrats, this is not a partisan issue – 90% of Democrats support pay stabilization, while 90% of Republican also support it.

Looking towards the 2024 election this fall, this issue has the potential to move senior voters. 68% of seniors indicate they would be *more likely* to support a candidate who supports protecting outpatient physical therapy services from Medicare pay cuts.



## **To prevent accidental falls, seniors strongly support the *Stopping Addiction and Falls for the Elderly (SAFE) Act*.**

Given the concern seniors have regarding age-related accidental falls, it is not surprising that there is high support to expand access for Medicare beneficiaries to receive fall assessments delivered by physical and occupational therapists to reduce Americans' risk of falling.

After receiving background information about the SAFE Act, 87% of seniors indicate they support the bill, with 57% offering their “strong support”. Majority support is consistent across all demographic and ideological groups, including Democrats (90% support) and Republicans (81% support).

Additionally, there are no immediate downsides to supporting the SAFE Act - 69% of seniors are more likely to vote for a candidate who supports the act, and 29% said it would have no impact on their vote. Only 2% would be less likely to vote for that candidate.

Finally, the inclusion of fall prevention services for Medicare beneficiaries would generate more positive views towards Medicare in general. 75% of seniors say they would be MORE supportive of the Medicare program if it provided older Americans specialized falls risk assessment and prevention services provided by physical therapists and occupational therapists.