

Trips to the tumble teacher helping elderly Dutch bounce back from a fall

Senay Boztas Reuver

At the age of 81, Els van Geenen takes a deep breath, raises her arms ... and lets herself fall.

Van Geenen, from the southeast of the Netherlands, has previously had a stroke but is determined not to be like 112,000 Dutch pensioners who ended up in the casualty department after a fall last year – or the 7,000 whose fall contributed to their death.

Instead, she and seven others in the village of Reuver are taking a five-week course to improve their balance, spatial awareness and safe falling skills. “The idea is to roll first on your shoulders, and then your hips – and I shouldn’t hear a smack,” said Koen Reamakers, 31, a sports physiotherapist and judo coach, who is demonstrating how to fall on a gym mat. “I can’t stop people from falling, but if they do fall, they can fall in a good way.”

One participant, Paul Reijnen, 75, knows the dangers of falling badly. “Two years ago, I slipped on the ice in January, fell on my head and later needed an operation,” he said. “Now I know that you put your chin to your chest so that you don’t smack your head.”

This group of volunteers is on the front line of Dutch preventive healthcare. Social investors have put cash into a “health impact bond” to train 2,500 older people at increased risk of a fall in the Limburg region, aiming to prevent 3,940 expensive fall incidents.

Like other western nations with ageing populations, the Netherlands is realising that taking a tumble – whether it’s on a banana skin or down the

stairs – is no joke. New figures by Statistics Netherlands show four times as many people died from a fall in 2023 as 20 years ago. In the UK, bone fractures after falls cost £4.4 billion a year.

David Baden, president of the Dutch Society of Emergency Physicians, is the joint author of a paper that found while the population of the Netherlands increased by 17 per cent from 1990 to 2021, fall-related deaths rose by 230 per cent, from 1,584 to 5,234 a year. The rate of increase is due to continue as the population ages.

“When you become older, the risk of falling is bigger because your sense of balance will deteriorate, your muscles are weaker, so it’s more difficult to break the fall, and your reaction time is also slower,” he said. “The chances of a head bleed are bigger and the chances of recovery are smaller.”

The World Health Organisation says falls are the second-biggest cause of accidental deaths from injury worldwide. According to Caroline Abrahams, the director of Age UK, there is a clear need for an evidence-based approach in Britain to prevent falls. “More older people in our society means more falls,” she said. “We have to regard them as a serious threat.”

One positive side-effect – obvious in Reuver when the coach paused for a coffee break and Riet Hoogeveen, 80, produced a cake – is social contact. Wietske Hoekstra, a consultant on fall prevention at the national safety organisation VeiligheidNL, said fear of falling could quickly lead to

social isolation. “The group programmes have a real social component,” she said. “As soon as you get people in, they think it’s fantastic.”

Hoogeveen, who was recently diagnosed with epilepsy, bounced out of the sports hall after the fall training, ball work and some spatial-awareness games. “I thought before, if you fall, then that’s it!” she said. “But it’s about your condition. You have to do it yourself.”

ROOS PIERSON FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES



Koen Reamakers puts pensioners through their paces on a five-week course that teaches them how to fall correctly. Last year trips landed 112,000 elderly Dutch people in hospital

