

Improving Home Safety for Seniors

Fact Sheet No. 9.913

Consumer Series | Housing

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Our homes fulfill many needs. The most basic is protection from the elements and intruders. Once we are warm and secure, other needs arise. Comfort and a place for self-expression are vital for our well-being. A home gives a feeling of independence. It also provides access to important community services.

For the maturing population, housing is especially important. It serves as a storehouse of memories, provides the major location for family interaction, and is the major financial asset for most families.

The 65-plus population will be radically transformed as the baby-boom generation ages. No segment of the population will change as much as mature Americans. There are currently 40 million people (13% of Americans) aged 65 or older. By 2050 this will increase to 88 million. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the housing needs of the elderly.

Shelter and Protection

We must feel safe and secure in order to be able to relax, so be security conscious. Front and back doors should have strong dead bolt locks. If possible, install a burglar alarm system. Excellent security systems are now available at relatively low costs.

A peephole for all your outside doors is a good idea so you can see who is at the door before you open it. Make sure it is at the proper height for you. It should let you see a range of 180 degrees from side to side.

Comfort and Self-Expression

Not only should your home offer physical comfort, but it should provide emotional comfort as well. Surround yourself with things you like.

These could be items from the past. Retrieve mementos from attics and old trunks that stir pleasant memories. There are many suitable places for objects and pictures from the past.

Safety

Home accidents are a major source of injuries and can even cause death. The elderly are especially vulnerable to serious injuries from home accidents. Older bones are often less dense, more brittle and break more easily. A simple fall can become a serious, disabling injury that limits independence.

As we age, our senses of sight, touch, hearing and smell tend to decline. Our physical abilities are reduced, making it more difficult to stretch, lift and bend. Our judgment and reaction time also slow. As a result, we cannot respond as quickly as when we were younger. These normal changes in perception, physical abilities and judgment make us more prone to accidents. Simple precautions and adjustments can help ensure a safe, accident-free home.

The following checklists will help you evaluate the safety of your home and habits. Go through your home and check off those items or behaviors that apply to you. If there are some items that you do not check, then your home is not as safe as it could be. By improving those items, you can make your home a safer and more comfortable place to live.

General Safety

- Emergency numbers and your address are posted by each telephone.
- The telephone can be reached from the floor or you carry a cell phone with you.
- Inside and outside door handles and locks are easy to operate.
- Door handles are lever-action instead of round knobs.
- Door thresholds have been removed or are low and beveled.



Quick Facts

- Make sure front and back doors have strong dead bolt locks.
- Post emergency numbers and your address by each telephone, and add to your cell phone.
- Set the thermostat of the water heater at 120 degrees F or lower to prevent accidental scalding.
- As a reminder to keep the smoke alarm working, change the batteries on your birthday.
- Keep a lamp or flashlight and telephone within reach of your bed.
- Make sure handrails are sturdy and securely fastened.

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- Windows are easily opened from the inside but have secure locks that can prevent someone from entering from the outside.
- There is an emergency exit. You can add an escape route through portable ladders or chutes.
- The thermostat of the water heater is set at 120 degrees F or lower to prevent accidental scalding.
- Medications are stored in a safe place according to instructions on the label of the package or container.
- Carpeting and rugs are not worn or torn.
- Small, loose rugs have nonskid backing and are not placed in traffic areas.
- Appliances, lamps and cords are clean and in good condition.
- There are no exposed bulbs in lamps or fixtures that can cause glare.
- Automated lighting controls are installed.
- All electrical equipment bears the Underwriters Laboratories (UL) label.
- Enough outlets are located where they are needed in every room.
- Electrical overload protection is provided by circuit breakers, fuses or ground fault circuit interrupters (GFCI).
- The electrical service has enough capacity and is up to code. (An electrical inspector can check the wiring in your house.)
- Extension cords do not carry more than their proper load, as indicated on the cord or appliance.
- Electrical cords are placed out of the traffic flow and are not underneath rugs and furniture.
- Smoke and carbon monoxide alarms are installed and in working order. (One idea to help you remember to change the batteries is to replace them on your birthday.)
- Assistive listening devices are used for small room amplification, personal listening and TV listening.

Kitchen

- The range and sink areas are well lighted.
- If you have a gas range, it is equipped with pilot lights and an automatic cut-off in the event of flame failure. (Your local utility service can check this for you.)

- The range is not located under a window with curtains that might fall onto a burner.
- If you have an exhaust hood for the oven, it has easily removable filters for proper cleaning. Clean filters as needed.
- The kitchen exhaust system is internally vented, discharges directly outside, or discharges through ducts to the outside and not into the attic or other unused space.
- Countertop space and height is ample to keep carrying and lifting to a minimum.
- Work surfaces are not shiny or glaring.
- Countertops are adjustable.
- There is enough countertop lighting for meal preparation.
- Cabinet shelving is replaced with drawers or pull-out components.
- Kitchen wall cabinets are not too high to be easily reached.
- The light switch is located near the door.
- Oven controls are clearly marked and easily grasped.
- Oven controls are located on the front or side of the oven.
- The kitchen sink has a single-lever mixing faucet.
- Flooring is safe and nonslip.
- When cooking, you turn pan handles away from other burners and the edge of the range.
- When cooking, you avoid wearing garments with long, loose sleeves.
- Hot pads and pan holders are kept near the range.
- The exhaust fan is turned on when using the range.
- If you have a microwave oven, operate it only when there is food in it. Use potholders to avoid burns.
- Small appliances are unplugged when not in use.
- Knives are kept in a knife rack or drawer.
- Counter tops and work areas are cleared of all unnecessary objects.
- Drawers and cupboards are kept closed.
- You use a sturdy, stable stepladder or stepstool rather than a chair to reach objects in overhead cabinets.
- You wipe up grease or liquid spills at once.

Stairways and Halls

- Foyer has a nonslip entrance.
- Steps are in good condition and are free of objects.

- Steps have nonskid strips or their carpeting is securely fastened and free of fraying or holes.
- There are smoke detectors in hallways and near sleeping areas.
- Hallways are equipped with night-lights.
- Sturdy handrails are on both sides of stairways and are securely fastened.
- Light switches are located at the top and bottom of stairways and at both ends of long hallways.
- Inside doors do not swing out over stair steps.
- There is enough overhead space in the stairway to avoid bumping your head.
- Room entrances do not have raised door thresholds.
- It is easy to see the leading edge or nosing of each stair tread while walking down stairs. (Use tape of contrasting color if not.)
- Stairways and hallways are well lighted.

Living Room

- Electrical cords are placed along walls, not under rugs, and away from traffic areas.
- Chairs and couches are sturdy and secure.
- Chairs and couches are not too low or too deep to get in and out of easily.
- Chairs and couches have full arms to aid in sitting or rising.
- The light switch is located near the entrance.
- There is enough space to walk through the room, leaving clear passageways for traffic.
- Furniture that might be used for support when walking or rising is steady and does not tilt.

Bathroom

- The bathtub or shower has a nonskid mat or strips on the standing area.
- Bathtub or shower doors are glazed with safety glass or plastic.
- Grab bars are installed on the walls by the bathtub and toilet.
- Shower has a hand-held showerhead with flexible hose.
- The towel bars and the soap dish in the shower stall are made of durable materials and are firmly installed.
- The shower or tub has a single-lever, antiscald mixing faucet.

- Bathroom flooring is matte-finished, textured tile or low pile commercial carpet (not throw rugs or bathmats).
- The bathroom has even lighting without glare.
- The light switch is located near the door.
- The bathroom door opens outward.
- The bathroom has a safe, supplemental heat source and ventilation system.
- The outlets are ground fault circuit interrupters (GFCI) that protect against electric shock.
- A night-light is available.
- If needed, an accessible shower or tub can be installed.

Bedroom

- You keep a lamp or flashlight within reach of your bed. Periodically check the batteries.
- A night-light is used to brighten the way to the bathroom at night.
- You have plenty of room to walk around the bed.
- You have an adequate-sized nightstand or small table for the telephone or cell phone, glasses and other important items.
- There is a sturdy chair with arms where you can sit to dress.
- The bedroom has wall-to-wall, low-pile carpeting or a smooth-surface floor covering.
- You use a bedroom on the first floor of the home if necessary.

Outdoor Area

- Steps and walkways are in good condition.
- Handrails are sturdy and securely fastened.
- Doorways, steps, porches and walkways have good lighting.
- Porches, balconies, terraces, window wells and other heights or depressions are protected by railings, closed with banisters, closed with fences, closed with accordion gates, or are otherwise protected.
- Hedges, trees or shrubs do not hide the view of the street from the driveway.

- Security lighting is installed outside the house.
- Garage doors are easy to operate, even when snow is piled against them.
- The garage is adequately ventilated.

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Additional Resources

AARP
www.aarp.org

Administration on Aging
www.aoa.gov

Center for Universal Design
www.design.ncsu.edu

Eldercare Locator
www.eldercare.gov

Homemods.org
www.homemods.org