

Update: Senior Home Safety



Home Safety for Seniors

Taking precautions helps keep seniors safe at home

If you are like most seniors, you want to stay in your own home for as long as you can. According to an AARP survey, 83% of Americans do. But many homes are not designed to meet the needs of their aging owners. A house that was perfect for you in your 50s or 60s may be dangerous for you in your 70s and 80s. But the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) research shows that home modifications and repairs can prevent 30% to 50% of all home accidents, including falls, among seniors. Remaining independent as long as possible means keeping yourself safe at home.

Seniors need to take extra safety precautions due to physical changes as they get older. Parts of the normal aging process – declining vision, hearing, sense of touch, sense of smell or bone density – increase the risk of injury. It may become difficult to sense heat, hear a smoke alarm, or smell a gas leak. A decrease in balance can make falling more likely. Plus, as your body ages, it takes longer to heal and recover from injuries. Seniors must be especially cautious when returning home from a stay in a hospital or rehab facility because their bodies may still be healing or adjusting to more limited capabilities.

Perhaps the greatest risk to seniors is falls. Nearly one third of America's seniors fall *each year*. These falls account for more than half of all injuries in seniors and result in more than 1.5 million emergency room visits, 850,000 fractures, and 16,000 deaths every year according to the CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Falls are a common problem for seniors, and the risk increases the older you get.

Seventy percent of falls occur at home. But making some simple changes around the house, and being aware of potential fall hazards, can significantly lessen the chance of you or your loved ones taking a tumble.

The CDC recommends four things to reduce the chance of falls:

- Exercise – if your body is stronger, you are less likely to fall or get hurt when you do.
- Review your medications – some can cause blurred vision.
- Have your vision checked for age-related changes.
- Make your home safer.

There are many ways to increase home safety, and a number of organizations and websites offer checklists for reviewing your home for hazards (see Resources). It is easy to significantly reduce your chances of being injured at home by recognizing potential dangers, taking precautions, and making adjustments. Often hazards are things that have simply been overlooked, like uneven surfaces or cluttered paths.

Prepare yourself for safety

There are many things seniors can do to help lessen their chance of a dangerous fall at home, such as eating a healthy diet. Food deficiencies can increase the risk of bone loss, heart disease, diabetes, and arthritis, all of which increase the risk of falling, so eat right for a healthy heart, strong bones, and resistance to infection and injury. Eating poorly or not eating enough can cause weakness and dizziness and increase the risk of a fall, so eat regular, well-balanced meals.

Other simple behaviors can help prevent falls. Wear sturdy shoes with non-skid soles to help prevent slips. And don't try to walk on stairs wearing your reading glasses.

One practice to consider adopting is checking in with a family member, friend, or neighbor on a daily basis. That way, if you fall and are unable to get to the phone, someone will know that something is wrong. Or consider getting an emergency medical response system with a button that sends a signal to an individual, physician, rescue squad, or 911.

Falls are a leading threat to the independence of older people, and even minor injuries can affect seniors' quality of life. But taking care of yourself, keeping up with your physical activity to maintain your strength and flexibility, eating right, and making your home a safe place to be can help you lower your risk.

About My Health Care Manager

My Health Care Manager helps older adults and their families understand and navigate the health issues and complex decisions associated with aging. For more information, contact My Health Care Manager, 8520 Allison Pointe Blvd., Suite 230, Indianapolis, IN 46250, 317-598-8921 or 800-499-8020 or visit us on the Web at www.MyHealthCareManager.com.

Home Safe Home Checklist

Make these changes and help make your home a safe haven.

Lighting

- Increase the lighting in your home, especially along walkways (indoors and out). Keep lighting levels consistent, and consider using automatic sensor lights.
- Use night lights, and have a table lamp near your bed.
- Keep flashlights handy in case of a power outage.

Living Areas

- Remove clutter from the floor.
- Don't use throw rugs, and make sure area rugs are secured.
- Position furniture in low-traffic areas and make sure it's stable, without sharp corners, if possible.
- Keep extension cords out of the way to prevent trips.
- Anchor shelves to the wall so they can't fall on anyone. Keep items on shelves at easy-to-reach levels.
- Install handrails on all stairs, even if there are only a few steps.
- Secure stairway carpeting or runners.
- Make sure stairways are well lit and there are light switches at the top and bottom of each flight.

Kitchen

- Store heavy items in lower cupboards.
- Keep pots and pans and food in easy-to-reach locations.
- Use a stable step stool with a safety rail for reaching high places.
- Make sure stove *on* and *off* positions are clearly marked.

Bathrooms

- Place non-skid adhesive strips in the tub or on the floor to prevent slips.
- Install a grab bar or handrail in the shower or bathtub and near the toilet. This makes getting in and out easier and gives you something to hold onto if you should feel unsteady while bathing. A bath seat can also make bathing easier.
- Avoid cleaning products that leave a slippery residue, especially in the bathtub.
- Keep the water heater set below 120 degrees to avoid scalding.

Outdoors

- Keep walkways and steps in good repair and free of clutter, snow and leaves.
- Make sure outdoor stairs and decks have railings and provide good traction.
- Consider a ramp to replace steps if necessary.
- Make sure thresholds or entries from garages are not trip hazards.

Fire Safety

- Develop a fire safety plan and escape route in case of fire.
- Keep a fire extinguisher handy, especially in the kitchen.
- Install smoke alarms on each level, including in hallways directly outside of bedrooms and in the basement.

- Test smoke detectors regularly and change the batteries twice a year. Make sure hardwired smoke detectors have battery back-ups.
- Use carbon monoxide detectors in homes with gas furnaces, gas water heaters, or wood burning stoves.
- Keep space heaters away from flammable materials.

Medical Safety

- Keep a first aid kit handy. It should at least include disinfecting soap, gel or towelettes, bandages and antibiotic ointment, aspirin and/or non-aspirin pain reliever, and several doses of your prescription medications (make sure they are not beyond their expiration dates).
- Always ask your doctor about possible interactions of the medications you are taking.
- Use sleeping medications cautiously. Some cause dizziness and could contribute to unsteadiness and falls.
- Keep a list of prescriptions and dosages on your refrigerator - and a copy in your wallet - in case you are unable to tell someone what medications you take.
- Keep a list of emergency numbers (emergency contact, physician) near all phones.

In addition to making a home safe for seniors, you may also need to keep it safe for visiting children.

- Keep medications and cleaning products out of reach.
- Install safety latches on cupboards and medicine cabinet doors.
- Use safety gates for stairs or unsafe rooms.

What to Do If You Fall

Falls pose a serious risk to seniors. Moderate to severe injuries occur in 20-30% of people who fall, ranging from bruises and scrapes to hip fractures and head traumas, as reported by the CDC. Almost 25% of the seniors who visited the ER for fall-related injuries in 2005 were hospitalized. Without timely help, it's likely fall victims will lose their independence and require a rehabilitation facility or nursing home.

If you do fall, and do not have a medical alarm, the National Institutes of Health offers these suggestions:

- Try to stay calm. Take a few deep breaths to help you relax.
- Roll over onto your side and push yourself up into a seated position.
- Rest while your body and blood pressure adjust.
- Slowly get up on your hands and knees, and crawl to a sturdy chair.
- Put your hands on the chair seat and slide one foot forward so that it is flat on the floor. Keep the other leg bent so the knee is on the floor.
- From this kneeling position, slowly rise and turn your body to sit in the chair.
- If you are hurt or can't get up, call someone for help or call 911. If you are alone, try to get into a comfortable position and wait for help to arrive.

Resources

- **Administration on Aging**, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, www.aoa.gov
- **Seniors Safe Living Guide**, www.homesecurityguru.com/the-seniors-safe-living-guide-part-ii-keeping-your-home-safe.
- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention National Center for Injury Prevention and Control**, www.cdc.gov/ncipc, has a Fall Prevention handbook with information on the risks of seniors falling.
- The **Home Safety Council (HSC)** website, www.homesafetycouncil.org, offers information, illustrated handouts, and a virtual home safety tour.
- **Working Caregiver** has an extensive checklist for family or caregivers to use to evaluate home safety, www.workingcaregiver.com/articles/safetytips/homesafetytips.
- At **about.com** you can sign up for an email course on "6 Days to a Senior Safe Home," seniorhealth.about.com/c/ec/1.htm.
- The **National Aging in Place Council** "Guide to Aging in Place – Making Your Home Senior Friendly" website offers safety guides, including photos of safety treatments, and a free download of Modifying Your Home Environment to Promote Greater Independence: A Guide to Aging in Place, www.naicpc.org.
- **My Health Care Manager**, 800-499-8020 x 1 or www.myhealthcaremanager.com.

This information is meant to complement the advice of your health care providers, not replace it. Talk to your doctor if you have any health concerns.

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