

Home Make-Overs

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At 38 years old, we searched for what I hoped would be the home we would live in for the rest of our lives. As we toured homes with Stephanie, I looked to make sure that there was a bedroom and full bathroom on the ground floor. I checked to see if there was enough room to cover the entry way steps with a ramp. Yes, the bathroom tub could be replaced with a walk-in shower and there was room to eventually move the washer and dryer up to the ground floor from the basement if needed. Stephanie smiled and asked, "Jeannette, who did you say is going to be living in this house?" I grinned and said, "We are! But you see I'm a geriatrician and it's got to last the duration!"

Remember, it was Benjamin Franklin who said, "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Here are my home medical safety tips:

- Medication errors are one of the leading causes of death in America. Organize your medications or have someone help you organize your medication if that is not one of your strengths.
 - On each pill bottle write what the medication is for. For example, on the bottle of lisinopril, write, "high blood pressure"
 - If you're supposed to stop a medication put a big X on the bottle with the date and store the bottle separate from the medications you need to be taking every week.
 - If you have multiple pills of the same kind and the same dose, combine them into one bottle.
 - Buy a pillbox with rows for when you need to take your medications. For example, if you take your medications in the morning and at night, the pill box should have 2 rows, with 7 boxes for each day of the week in each row.
 - Fill the pillbox every week.
- Falls are a leading cause of injury in seniors.
 - Remove throw rugs
 - Remove wheels from chairs
 - Clean up piles of clutter
 - Widen walkways and paths to at least 32 inches across, even if you have to donate furniture to make more room to move around
 - Move electrical cords out of the way and consider affixing them to the moldings
 - Wear non-stick foot wear that is secure on your feet
 - Have a cane or walker that you are willing and able to use. Many people use hiking poles instead of canes because it makes them feel younger, others find them more comfortable on the wrist than a standard cane or walker.
 - Install railing on both sides of all stairs, inside and outside of the home
 - Placing a different color of duct tape at the edge of each step can help seniors see the step better, and nonstick treads prevents slipping on steps.
 - Some may need stairlifts

- Renovate the bathroom as it is the most dangerous room in the house.
 - Install grab bars in the shower or tub area, and beside the toilet
 - Consider elevating the toilet seat... although you need to have your feet firmly on the ground to engage the abdominal muscles to have a bowel movement (this is why toddlers struggle to poop – their feet are dangling)
 - Roll out the rubber mat in the tub to prevent slipping
 - Consider a shower chair and hand-held showerhead
 - Set the thermostat on the water heater to <120 degrees F to prevent accidental burns
 - Install a motion detector nightlight in the bathroom and everywhere else
 - You may need to install a walk-in shower, rather than one where you have to step into a tub.
- Decorate the refrigerator
 - List 911, emergency contacts, family members' phone numbers, the patients' primary care doctor, and poison control (1-800-222-1222) and place these numbers on the refrigerator
 - Place a copy of your CPR directive and medical durable power of attorney's name and phone number on the refrigerator. Paramedics know to look there for instruction.
- Simplify technology
 - Make sure you have a phone that you can use.
 - Ideally have a phone that can be kept in the pocket. This will keep you from feeling like you have to run to pick up the phone.
 - Enlarge the font or find someone who can help you... just do what I do, and ask the youngest person in the room. Even the 8-years-olds are better at programming the phones than I am.
 - Ensure that you can easily call family members and know when they are calling.
- Protect against fire
 - Change the batteries in your smoke detectors and carbon monoxide detectors on New Year's Day and the Fourth of July.
 - Check for damaged or frayed electrical cords or overloaded power strips.
 - Remove candles and space heaters from the home
 - If dementia sets in, unplug stoves or have them disconnected from the gas line.
- Make the kitchen friendlier
 - Unclutter the cabinets and rearrange items to limit reaching and bending
 - Install pullout shelves in cabinets for easier access
 - If possible, use a refrigerator with a lower drawer freezer
 - Elevate the front of the refrigerator so that the door always closes
 - Install a swivel plate into the corner cabinets to avoid bending and reaching
 - Use an electric teakettle that automatically shuts off rather than a stove top kettle.
 - Consider color coding the hot faucet with a red rubberized water faucet cover and the cold with a blue rubberized water faucet cover

- Replace round kitchen water faucets with levers.
- Clean out the refrigerator and food cupboard or pantry weekly. Throw out expired and soured food.
- The monsters aren't under the bed.
 - The monster is the bed. It can be really hard to get out of sagging soft mattress. Replace it with a firm one that is at a height that will allow you to get in and out of easily, but that is not so high as to cause injury if you were to fall out.
 - I've seen some great floor to ceiling telescoping grab bars beside the bed to help seniors get in and out of bed.
 - Keep a flashlight under the bed... just in case there are monsters under the bed.
 - Keep a sturdy chair in the bedroom for dressing
- More home renovation projects?
 - Replace round door knobs with levers instead.
 - Replace burnt out light bulbs and install more light fixtures
 - You may need to move light switches.
 - Remove locks from inside doors
 - Keep stairs and paths clean of snow, ice and leaf debris or hire a service or neighbor to help.
 - You may need to widen doorways.
 - Research alert necklaces and bracelets