

A piece of the puzzle

Information for
families and friends
of older adults



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Home Safety Tips

Ways to make staying at home safer

NOTE: These tips have been compiled from sources including The Alzheimer's Association, the AARP, federal agencies, and home health and home care companies. This information may not be complete or applicable to your unique situation. A "home safety evaluation" by a qualified professional such as an occupational therapist or a physical therapist can be very helpful. It is also recommended that any structural work be done by licensed and insured professionals.

Appropriate supports for aging in place

Older adults tend to be extremely reluctant to change things in their homes, especially as it becomes more difficult for them to adapt to new surroundings. It can be helpful to discuss that changes are necessary to continue living safely at home. Gentle but firm explanations can support taking incremental steps toward improving home safety and reducing risks.

For many older adults, particularly people with dementia, depth perception and the ability to distinguish colors are often compromised. For example, many people with dementia have difficulty seeing and understanding darkly colored objects: a black doormat may be perceived as large, deep hole in the floor. Contrasting colors can help people better perceive space and depth throughout their house. Sharply contrasting the colors of different elements in the home, such as flooring, furniture, bedding and window coverings, can help people navigate more safely.

The information in this handout is organized into these sections:

- General home safety tips
- Phone
- Electrical
- Entrance, outdoors, windows/doors
- Interior: flooring, walkways, steps/stairs, furniture, lighting
- Living room
- Bedroom
- Bathroom:
- Kitchen: organization, appliances, food handling, sink, tools
- Laundry room
- Garage/basement

General Home Safety Tips

- If home has gas service: Ask the gas company to modify your stove/appliances to provide a gas odor that is strong enough to alert you if the pilot light goes out. Avoid the use of flammable and volatile compounds near gas appliances and do not store these materials in an area where a gas pilot light is used.
- Store potentially hazardous items, such as medication, alcohol, matches, sharp objects or small appliances and tools, in a securely locked cabinet.
- Keep all cleaning products, such as liquid laundry pacs and bleach, out of sight or secured to avoid possible ingestion of harmful chemicals.
- Make sure carbon monoxide detectors, smoke detectors, and fire extinguishers are located where they should be and are inspected regularly. Replace batteries twice a year during daylight saving time.
- Set the hot water heater to 120 degrees Fahrenheit or below to prevent scalding or burning.
- Remove portable space heaters.
- If you use portable fans, be sure that objects cannot be placed in the blades.
- Consider enrolling in a wandering response service. Contact the Alzheimer's Association 24/7 Helpline (800.272.3900) for more information.
- Keep all medications (prescription and over-the-counter) locked. Each bottle of prescription medicine should be clearly labeled with the person's name, name of the drug, drug strength, dosage frequency, and expiration date. Child-resistant caps are available if needed.
- Keep all alcohol in a locked cabinet or out of reach, as alcohol can increase confusion.
- Keep matches and cigarette lighters out of reach. If the person with Alzheimer's smokes, remove matches, lighters, ashtrays, cigarettes, and other means of smoking from view (the person may forget the desire to smoke).
- LED lightbulbs don't get hot like other types of bulbs. Replace candles with artificial LED candles.
- Avoid clutter, which can create confusion and danger. Throw out or recycle newspapers and magazines regularly. Keep all areas where people walk free of furniture.
- Keep plastic bags out of reach to avoid risk of choking or suffocating.
- Remove all guns and other weapons from the home or securely lock them up. Even when locked up, install safety locks on guns or remove ammunition and firing pins.
- Place red tape around floor vents, radiators, and other heating devices to deter anyone from standing on or touching them when hot.
- Remove all poisonous plants from the home. Check with local nurseries or contact poison control (1-800-222-1222) for a list of poisonous plants.
- Consider using app-connected locator tiles or fobs on items like phones, purses, remote controls, or other items that seem to get lost frequently.
- Do you have an alarm system?
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Phone

- Is the telephone readily available for emergencies? Does the telephone have volume control?
- By each phone, display emergency numbers and the home address.
- Keep a list of key contacts, doctors, hospitals, and poison control helplines.
- Consider making cell phones so that only stored contacts ring through (e.g., do not disturb feature).
- Some phones are made for seniors that show a picture for each contact and have no keypad, and only listed contacts can call that phone.
- Have a regular location where phones are kept. Consider using a brightly colored paper to mark the location so it is easily found.
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Electrical

- Can you turn switches easily on and off?
- Are outlets properly grounded to prevent a shock?
- If possible, avoid the use of extension cords by placing lamps and appliances close to electrical outlets. If extension cords must be used, ensure they are in good condition, and secure them to the baseboards of a room to avoid tripping.
- Cover unused electrical outlets with childproof plugs.
- Have an electrician inspect the circuit panel and wiring for safety.
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Entrance, windows and doors, outdoor areas**Entrance**

- Does the front door have a view panel or peephole at the right height?
- Can you hear the doorbell ring all throughout the house?
- Keep an extra set of keys hidden near the door for easy access.
- Consider a keypad lock with settings that can be changed if needed.
- Place a small shelf, bench, or table by the entry door to hold parcels while unlocking the door.
- Make sure outside lighting is adequate. Light sensors that turn on lights automatically as you approach the house may be useful.
- Consider a "NO SOLICITING" sign for the front gate or door.
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Windows and doors

- Are windows and doors easy to open and close? Are locks sturdy and easy to operate?
- Install alert systems/alarms that notify you when a door or window is opened.
- Apply stickers or decals to glass doors at eye-level to ensure doors are visible.
- Install a latch or deadbolt either above or below eye-level on all doors.
- Can you walk through the doorways easily? Do doorways accommodate a walker or wheelchair?
- Is there space to maneuver while opening and closing windows and doors?
- Remove locks on interior doors to prevent the person from locking themselves in.
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Other outdoor areas

- Keep outdoor steps sturdy and textured to prevent falls in wet or icy weather.
- Eliminate uneven surfaces or walkways, hoses, and other objects that may cause a person to trip.
- Prune bushes and foliage well away from walkways and doorways. Keep walkways clear of debris and clutter, and place overhanging items out of reach.
- In the patio area, remove any fuel source and fire starters from any grills when not in use, and supervise use.
- For any swimming pool or pond, fence it with a locked gate, cover it, and closely supervise it when in use.
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Throughout the interior

Flooring

- Flooring surfaces: Carpeting is fine, and softer for absorbing a fall if it happens – but it needs to be able to accommodate a person’s shuffling or uneven gait. Smooth, commercial style or flat berber types are best. Newer nonslip wood and tile look flooring options are also available.
- Ensure surfaces are even: 1/8th of an inch difference presents a tripping danger.
- Scatter rugs or area rugs can be easy to trip on – tape the edges down, or take them out.
- Remove tripping hazards such as extension cords, phone cords, and excessive clutter.
- Any steps or changes in floor levels should be obvious, well-marked, and well-lit.
- Look at home trim, paint and thresholds - reflective tape or paint can mark hazards.
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Steps, Stairs, Walkways

- Are all surfaces in good shape – smooth and safe?
- Are there light switches at the top and bottom of the stairs?
- If possible, stairways should be carpeted or have safety grip strips, and stair treads should be deep enough for the whole foot to be entirely on the step. Put a gate across the stairs if the person has balance problems.
- Mark the edges of steps with bright or reflective tape and ensure railings are sturdy and secure to prevent tripping or falls.
- Stairways should have at least one handrail that extends beyond the first and last steps. Handrails should have grasping space for both knuckles and fingers. Best to have handrails on both sides.
- Consider installing a ramp with handrails as an alternative to the steps.
- Keep walkways clear of debris and clutter, and place overhanging items out of reach.
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Furniture

- Furniture could topple if a person grabs or uses items for support. Check that book shelves, cabinets or large TVs are secured to prevent tipping - attach to walls (at the studs) with an earthquake stability strap.
- Ensure chairs have armrests to provide support when going from a sitting to standing position.
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Lighting

- Changes in levels of light can be disorienting. Create an even level by adding extra lights in entries, outside landings, and areas between rooms, stairways and bathrooms.
- Use night lights in hallways, bedrooms and bathrooms.
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Living Room

- Keep the remote controls for the television, DVD player, and stereo system in a designated location, or stored out of sight.
- Place decals at eye level on sliding glass doors, picture windows, or furniture with large glass panels to identify the glass pane.
- Do not leave an open fire in the fireplace. Consider alternative heating sources.
- Keep matches and cigarette lighters out of reach.
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Bedroom

Adequate lighting should be provided for easy reading or television watching. Anticipate the reasons a person might get out of bed, such as hunger, thirst, going to the bathroom, restlessness, and pain. Try to meet these needs by offering food and fluids and scheduling ample toileting. A communication system should be established for nighttime needs as well: people can use an intercom-type system, baby monitor, security camera or even a bell to call for help.

Some people may develop a fear of the dark, so a nightlight placed in their room may help. Proper lighting should be available during nighttime hours as well in case your loved one needs to get up and use the bathroom. Be aware that dim lighting may cast shadows that can be misinterpreted by aging brains and trigger anxiety or even hallucinations, especially in people with dementia.

In some situations, a caregiver may need to learn how to help a loved one use a bedpan, urinal or bedside commode if nighttime trips to the bathroom are too difficult or unsafe. Purchasing a quality waterproof mattress protector and a few sets of linens is a good idea if a senior occasionally has overnight incontinence episodes.

- Use a night-light.
- Be cautious when using electric mattress pads, electric blankets, electric sheets, and heating pads, all of which can cause burns and fires. Keep controls out of reach.
- Use transfer or mobility aids such as a bed rail or transfer handle, pole, or hanging bar.
- If you are considering using a hospital-type bed with rails and/or wheels, read the Food and Drug Administration's safety information.
- Closely monitor the use of an electric blanket, heater or heating pad to prevent burns or other injuries.
- Provide seating near the bed to help with dressing.
- Ensure closet shelves are at an accessible height so that items are easy to reach, which may prevent the person from climbing shelves or objects falling from overhead.
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Bathroom

Bathrooms pose unique challenges for seniors and caregivers because they are typically composed of slick, hard materials and are relatively monotone in color. Falls are a serious concern, which is why installing grab bars on bathroom walls is strongly encouraged. These bars provide additional balance and support for both care receivers and caregivers while assisting with toileting and bathing.

- Is the counter the right height and depth?
- Can you work sitting down?
- Are faucets, cabinets, and drawers easy to use?
- Install grab bars for the shower, tub and toilet to provide additional support.
- Place nonskid adhesive strips, decals, or mats in the tub and shower. If the bathroom is uncarpeted, consider placing these strips next to the tub, toilet, and sink.
- Cover any exposed pipes to prevent burns.
- Use washable wall-to-wall bathroom carpeting to prevent slipping on wet tile floors.
- Remove cleaning products from under the sink, or lock them away.
- Use a night-light.
- Remove small electrical appliances from the bathroom and cover electrical outlets.
- If a person uses an electric razor, have them use it with a mirror outside the bathroom to avoid water contact.
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Toilet

- Black toilet seats might strike some as institutional-looking, but the contrast of the black seat against the white toilet helps you see it far better than a white seat.
- Use a raised toilet seat with handrails, or install grab bars beside the toilet.
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Tub/shower

- Can you easily get in and out of the tub or shower?
- Install grab bars in the tub/shower. A grab bar in contrasting color to the wall is easier to see.
- Consider installing a walk-in shower.
- In the shower, tub, and sink, use a single faucet that mixes hot and cold water to avoid burns.
- Set the water heater at 120°F to avoid scalding tap water.
- Use a foam rubber faucet cover (often used for small children) on a tub faucet to prevent serious injury in a fall.
- To make bathing easier, use a hand-held shower head on a hose, with a hook on the wall to hang it in a convenient place within easy reach.
- Insert drain traps to catch small items that may be lost or flushed down the drain.
- Use a sturdy and safe bath or shower seat.
- The edge of a shower can be taped with a black stripe or reflective tape for contrast.
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Kitchen

Many things in the kitchen can be fire hazards. Avoid wearing loose clothing when cooking, keep towels and potholders far away from hot surfaces, and clean up the stove immediately so that oil and fat don't build up on the surface. Open flames and food forgotten on burners and in the oven can easily start fires. Cooking together allows you to give gentle reminders and monitor safety.

Microwaves may seem like a safe option, but these appliances can pose risks, too. A can placed inside a microwave not only damages the appliance, but can also potentially cause an explosion or injury. Put a brightly marked sign on or near the microwave with instructions for its use.

Organization

- Is the room arranged safely and conveniently?
- Do the oven and fridge open easily?
- Is the counter the right height and depth?
- Can you work sitting down?
- Are cabinet doorknobs easy to use?
- Label food and kitchen items, post reminder signs, and use timers.
- Remove vitamins, prescription drugs, sugar substitutes and seasonings from the kitchen table and countertops.
- Keep cleaning supplies in a locked place. Do not use or store flammable liquids in the kitchen. Lock them in the garage or in an outside storage unit.
- Install bright lights and keep a night-light in the kitchen.
- Remove or secure the family "junk drawer." Someone with dementia may eat small items such as matches, hardware, erasers, plastics, etc.
- Remove toxic plants and decorative artificial fruits and vegetables or food-shaped kitchen magnets, which might appear to be edible.
- Remove scissors and knives from counter tops and drawers and store in a secure location.
- Remove any items that cause confusion.
- Use safety latches on doors and cabinets.
- Provide an area away from the stove where the person in your care can help prepare food.
- Place frequently used items where they are easy to reach.
- Store heavy objects at waist level
- Be sure the microwave, toaster, and kettle are in locations with adequate counter space, so a person can transfer items and dishes safely.
- Avoid keeping step stools or small ladders in the kitchen area, to prevent falls and injuries.
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Appliances

- Use appliances that have an automatic shut-off features. Replace appliances like a kettle or toaster oven with ones that automatically shut off and have safety controls.
- Add bright signage or labels if needed so controls are clearly marked and easy to use.
- Stoves/ovens can be temporarily disabled by installing safety knobs, or by removing knobs and taping the stem.
- For gas stoves, install a shut-off valve, and replace the pilot with an electric starter.
- For electric stoves, install a lock-out switch or circuit breaker so you can disable it when you leave the kitchen.

- Use an aluminum cover over the top of the stove, or use burner covers.
- Lock the oven door when not in use.
- Disable appliances when not in use: store smaller appliances away and unplug larger ones. Hide or get rid of dangerous small appliances.
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Food handling

- Mark food with purchase date; regularly check for and throw away expired items.
- Check the temperature of the refrigerator routinely and check for leaking water.
- Return leftovers to the refrigerator immediately after a meal. When in doubt, throw it out!
- Ensure meats and vegetables are stored in sealed containers.
- Consider pre-cooked foods or delivered meals.
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Sink

- Use a single-lever faucet that can balance water temperature.
- Consider an automatic turn-off on the faucet.
- For a faucet spout that swings outside the sink itself, install a brace that restricts the degree of movement so it keeps water in the sink at all times.
- Insert a drain trap in the kitchen sink to catch anything that may otherwise become lost or clog the plumbing.
- Disconnect the garbage disposal, or use a safety switch – air switches require the switch to be held for the disposal to be on; switch covers make it more difficult to access the switch.
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Cooking aids made specifically for older adults include:

- Wide-handled utensils with non-slip grips.
- One-handed cutting and preparation boards.
- Pot stabilizers.
- Arthritic friendly bottle openers.
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Laundry Room

- Keep the door to the laundry room locked if possible.
- Keep all cleaning products, such as liquid laundry pacs and bleach, out of sight or secured to avoid possible ingestion of harmful chemicals.
- Clean out lint screens and dryer ducts regularly to prevent fires.
- Consider installing safety locks on washing machines and dryers to prevent inappropriate items being put in or taken out too early.
- Remove large knobs from the washer and dryer or replace with safety controls if the person tampers with the machinery.
- If home has laundry chutes, install locks to avoid temptation to climb into or drop inappropriate items down the chute.

Garage and Basement

- Is there always space to park? Is it convenient to the entrance?
- Does the garage door open automatically? Is there a sensor so the automatic door won't shut on someone or something in its path?
- Limit access to large equipment such as lawn mowers, weed trimmers or snow blowers. Store sharp tools and saws securely.
- Keep all toxic materials, such as paint, fertilizers, gasoline, or cleaning supplies, out of view. Either put them in a high, dry place, or lock them in a cabinet.
- Lock and properly store ladders when not in use to prevent a tripping or climbing hazard.
- Remove access to car keys if the individual living with dementia is no longer driving.
- Lock access to all garages, sheds, and basements if possible.
- Secure and lock all motor vehicles and keep them out of sight if possible. Consider covering vehicles, including bicycles, that are not frequently used. This may reduce the possibility that the person will think about leaving.
- Keep walkways clear of debris and clutter, and place overhanging items out of reach.
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