

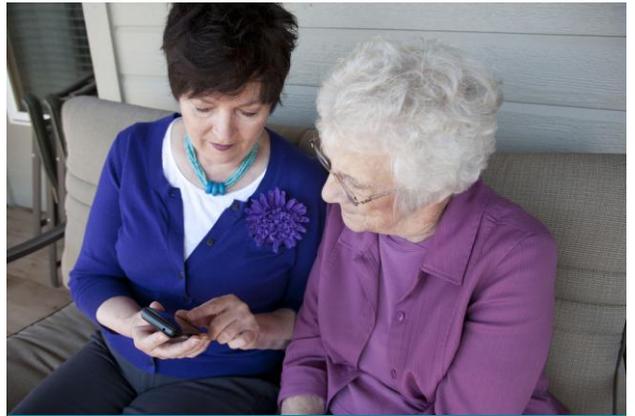
# HOME SAFETY

CARING FOR YOUR PARENTS: EDUCATION FOR THE FAMILY CAREGIVER®



 Home  
Instead  
SENIOR CARE®  
*To us, it's personal.*

The miracles of modern medicine are enabling all of us to live longer and more independently. It's a wonderful gift for many seniors to be able to stay in the home where they raised their families or to be in a new place that's become their retirement home. In fact, nearly 90% of seniors say they want to stay home. Doing so gives them a wonderful sense of continued independence and frees them from feeling like they might be a burden on family and loved ones.



### Did you know...?

Two-thirds of Baby Boomer women are concerned about their parent's ability to live independently. *Source: AARP®, 2007*

However, having mom or dad live alone can be a source of worry for their adult children. The "What if?" scenarios can often overwhelm the mind: "What if she falls down?" "What if he forgets something on the stove?" "What if she doesn't tell me it's getting harder to get around?" Certainly these are legitimate concerns and there are many factors to consider.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, falls and fires pose the greatest risks of danger for seniors. Here are the facts:

- Adults age 65 and older are among those at highest risk for residential fire deaths and injuries,
- Falls are the leading cause of injury deaths for Americans 65 years and older,
- Each year, about one third of adults 65 and older fall at least once,
- The rate of fall-related deaths among older adults rose significantly over the past decade, and
- 20-30% of people who fall suffer moderate to severe injuries such as bruises, hip fractures, and head traumas. These injuries can make it hard to get around and limit independent living. They also can increase the risk of early death.

Certainly those are pretty scary statistics – but knowing about the dangers gives you and your loved ones the power to take steps to prevent accidents before they happen.

In this workshop, we'll touch on ways to make life easier for your senior, while giving you an increased sense of comfort that mom and dad are living safely. We'll see why it's important to be vigilant about home safety, and identify the warning signs that your senior may be struggling. Then, we'll look at the potential dangers lurking in a home, and some simple things you can do to make life easier for the independent senior – and for you. Finally, we'll address considerations for seniors with special care needs, and look at when to consult professional help.

## WARNING SIGNS THAT A SENIOR IS STRUGGLING

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There are a number of warning signs that your parent or senior loved one might already be struggling with mobility.

**Check the bathroom.** Take a close look at towel bars, window sills and shower curtains. Are any of them loose and pulling away, or in the case of the shower curtain, is it torn?

If your senior is having trouble getting off the toilet, he or she could have developed a several-step process of using one or more of these items to get up. They might think of it as clever behavior and adapting to their needs, however if these items become loose or ripped, the next time they grab onto it, it could pull away completely resulting in an accident.

**Take a tour of the bedroom, favorite sitting areas and dining area.** Check window sills and curtains for signs of damage. Is anything missing from around their favorite seating area – perhaps a broken or missing table, lamp, or favorite decorative item? Or has another piece of furniture been repositioned?

These could be signs that your senior leaned on something for support and it didn't bear the weight or that he or she sought something else that would.

Some easy and inexpensive options to assist with sitting and standing include:

- Raised toilet seats with arms that lock onto an existing toilet, giving your senior the height and support to stand,
- A hand-held shower nozzle that fits over the tub's faucet so there is no need to reach up, and
- Floor-to-ceiling grab bars providing a full range of heights to hold onto while sitting or standing up. Grab bars can be installed by the bed, in the bathroom or by a favorite chair.

Other considerations for the senior who is having a hard time getting around is to not wax floors or apply other glossy, slippery treatments. Choose low pile carpets and make sure area rugs and carpets lay flat with no wrinkles or other obstructions that a foot could become caught on. In particular, check doorways, stairs and seams.

**Notes:**

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## **LIGHTING AND SECURITY MEASURES TO MAKE LIFE EASIER FOR YOUR SENIOR**

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In general, there are three mindsets that seniors have about making their homes safer as they age:

1. They don't like to admit they are getting older so they avoid making changes, or
2. They recognize that they need help, but don't know where to start to look for it, or
3. They worry about costs for making changes so avoid it altogether.

### **Complete a Home Assessment**

Conduct an objective review of the conditions of the home and determine what needs to be done to make it safe. Consider asking another family member or friend to assist you with this so he or she can take notes while you conduct the examination.

There are simple things you can do to make life easier for your senior loved one using lighting, color and security measures:

- **Ensure adequate lighting.** Examine dark pathways, corners and other areas where seniors regularly walk or read. Make sure that all areas of the home have sufficient lighting. Timed and motion-sensor lighting outdoors can illuminate potentially dangerous pathways. Inside, consider OttLites<sup>®</sup>, which provide a high-intensity beam for doing detail work.

It's also helpful to convert single-bulb light fixtures to multiple bulbs so seniors still have light when one bulb burns out. At a minimum, make sure all light fixtures are in good working order and that hallways and stairs are properly lit.

- **Avoid monochromatic color schemes.** Contrasting colors can help seniors with failing eyesight better navigate their homes. For instance, large red and blue buttons over hot and cold water faucet controls will help prevent dangerous mistakes. A dark green or brown toilet seat and vinyl tape around the shower will make those fixtures more easily distinguished.

Kitchen counters should also contrast with floors so the senior can easily distinguish where the counter begins and ends. Doing so can help to prevent burns and broken glass incidents.

- **Consider security.** Check both the front and back doors to make sure that visitors are visible prior to entry. Ensure that all locks are in working order and that you and other family members as well as trusted neighbors have an extra set of keys. It's also important to check the locks on interior doors. For instance, make sure bathroom locks can be disengaged from both sides, in case of an emergency.

Make sure smoke and carbon monoxide alarms are on every floor and be sure to replace the batteries every six months. It's also important to have a working fire extinguisher accessible in the kitchen and on each level of the home. For your senior's personal safety, make sure there is a phone available by the bed and that a flashlight and emergency items are within reach.

- **Look for ways to make entries safe.** Make sure that railings into a home are in good repair and that steps and sidewalks are not damaged. If possible, eliminate steps altogether. Make sure that doors into a home can be set to stay open for carrying groceries and other items in and out. Finally, if your parent has trouble with his or her hands, consider installing remote-control locks.

**Notes:**

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## SIMPLIFY AND ORGANICE YOUR SENIOR'S LIFE

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You can make life easier for your senior loved one by simplifying and organizing the household. This is the second part of the assessment of your parent's home to find ways to make it safer for them. It is a good idea to ask another family member or friend to assist you; he or she can take notes while you conduct the examination.

- **Look for ways to reorganize.** All of us can be creatures of habit. We leave things in certain areas so we know where to find them when we need them – but sometimes, things get put down and stay there. Who says the eggs must go in the egg tray of the refrigerator? Perhaps it's easier for your parents to handle them if they're stored in the meat tray. If the hallway table, which has always been a permanent fixture, is becoming a dangerous obstacle, relocate it. Everyone will get used to its new spot in no time.
- **Look behind closed doors.** Be sure to check behind closed doors for mold or water damage. Take a look around inside and make sure items aren't blocking vents or are improperly stored near a flammable source. Keeping air flowing and avoiding potential fire hazards are key to your senior's overall health and safety.
- **Is clutter taking over?** Messy conditions and broken items are important warning signs. Remove area rugs and stacks of newspapers and magazines, or other potential obstacles. Eliminate extra cords and secure those could cause someone to trip.
- **Look for ways to simplify your senior's life.** Talk to your parents about why and how they do things, then look for ways to simplify their lives. If the once immaculate floors are now regularly dirty, think about how that job has been done all these years and offer options. Rather than a heavy mop and bucket, investigate light-weight, all-in-one mops; or maybe it is time to consider a cleaning service.

Other easy fixes around the house include changing door knobs to levers, or purchasing grips that can go on conventional knobs. Also, various kitchen items are available including automatic openers that remove lids and open jars and bottles. Mobile stools are also particularly useful to help seniors navigate a kitchen.

- **Contact a professional senior-care service.** If this task seems daunting or you want an extra set of eyes to go over your safety measures, consider contacting a professional senior-care service provider. These dedicated and trained professionals can conduct a home safety review and add extra value to your efforts. They come armed with a checklist of about 50 items they will examine. Anything you might have missed likely won't escape their eyes and you can be certain you've done all you can to make the home safe.

### Notes:

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## SPECIAL NEEDS AND ACCIDENTS

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Seniors, like the rest of us, don't all fit into the same box. If you're caring for a senior who uses an assistive device or has a medical condition such as Alzheimer's, COPD, or diabetes, there are extra considerations to keep in mind while conducting a home safety audit:

- **Lock-in switches on thermostats and stoves will keep seniors with dementia and Alzheimer's disease from harming themselves.** You can also help them manage in their environment by installing a cordless intercom.
- **Rubber ramps that are ADA compliant are easy to install on most surfaces.** They stay in place by sheer weight and can be moved from one opening to another. These inexpensive items can make it easier for a wheelchair to navigate the home.
- **For seniors on oxygen, it's vitally important to keep open flames and combustible materials away from the oxygen tank.** Signage is also helpful to let visitors and emergency personnel know that oxygen is in use in the house and extra precautions are necessary.
- **Consider a personal emergency response system.** These devices can be worn by the senior and activated in an emergency.
- **All seniors, especially those with medical conditions, should keep a "File of Life" on their refrigerator.** Emergency responders are trained to look for this material. The file should contain a list of medications the senior is currently taking, any medical conditions, names and contact information of doctors and family members, as well as any other special medical instructions they want to share. Having this information readily available can assist with diagnosing medical conditions quickly and preventing improper treatments.

Once you have tackled and completed safety projects, it's important to keep an on-going vigilant eye on your senior loved one. Make note if he or she goes out less or seems to stay in one room, as this may be cause for concern.

Many people who experience a fall, even those who are not injured, develop a fear of falling. This fear may cause them to limit their activities, leading to reduced mobility and physical fitness, and thus increasing their actual risk of falling.

### **If your loved one has taken a tumble, or their health has changed, consider the following:**

- Redo the home safety check. As your senior's health changes, changes may need to happen in the home.
- Consult your senior loved one's physician and see if there is a course of action to help prevent future falls. The doctor may prescribe physical therapy, balance training or other affiliated medical assistance.
- Have a heart-to-heart talk with your senior about ways to protect their independence and reduce the risk of falling. This may include:
  - Participating in a regular exercise program, like Tai Chi, that increases strength and improves balance,

