

A Housing Safety Checklist

for Older People



Our homes fulfill many needs for us. Often, the most basic need is for shelter from the elements and intruders. Once we are protected and secure, other needs can be met. Comfort and a place for self-expression are vital for our well-being. Home gives a feeling of independence. Our home should also be a place in which we can be safe from accidents and injuries.

Shelter and Protection

You must feel safe and secure in order to be able to relax, so be security conscious. Put strong dead bolt locks on front and back doors. If your situation allows, install a burglar alarm system. A peephole for all outside doors will let you see who is at the door before you open it. Install the peephole at the proper height for you. The most effective peepholes allow you to see a range of 180 degrees from side to side.

As we age, our senses of sight, touch, hearing, and smell tend to decline. Our physical abilities are reduced, and certain tasks such as stretching, lifting, and bending become more difficult. In addition, we also experience a slowing of judgment and reaction time. As a result, we cannot respond as quickly as when we were younger. These normal changes in perception, physical abilities, and judgment makes us more prone to accidents. Simple precautions and adjustments can help ensure a safe, accident-free home.

Safety

Home accidents are a major source of injuries and can cause death. Older persons, whose bones are often less dense and more brittle, are especially vulnerable to serious injuries from home accidents. A simple fall that results in a broken bone can become a serious, disabling injury that limits one's independence.

On the following pages, you will find a series of checklists. Use these lists as you go through your home. Make a check mark next to those items or behaviors that you already have. If there are items that you do not check, then your home is not as safe as it could be. By improving those items not marked, you can make your home a safer and more comfortable place to live. While the suggestions in this publication are for older people, they apply to all age groups as well.

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General Safety

- _____ Emergency numbers and your address are posted by each telephone.
- _____ Telephones are located in each room. They can be reached from the floor in case of a fall.
- _____ Inside and outside door handles and locks are easy to operate.
- _____ Doors have lever-action handles instead of round knobs.
- _____ Door thresholds are low and beveled or there are no thresholds.
- _____ Windows open easily from the inside, but they have a secure locking system that can prevent someone from entering from the outside.
- _____ The water heater thermostat 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 non-skid backing and are not placed in traffic areas of the home.
- _____ Appliances, lamps, and cords are clean and in good condition.
- _____ There are no exposed, glaring bulbs in lamps or fixtures.
- _____ All electrical equipment bears the Underwriters laboratories (UL) label.
- _____ 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). GFCIs prevent electrical shock and are particularly important in areas where water is used, such as kitchens, bathrooms, and outside.
- _____ Electrical service has enough capacity to serve the house and is up to code. (You can call your municipal electrical inspector or a reputable electrical contractor to 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 flow of traffic and out from underneath rugs and furniture.
- _____ Smoke alarms are present in the home and are in working order. One way to help you remember to change the batteries is to replace them on your birthday—don't forget to mark it on your calendar.

Kitchen

- _____ The range and sink areas have adequate light levels.
- _____ 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 representative can check this for you.)
- _____ The range is not where curtains 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 lets you keep carrying and lifting to a minimum.
- _____ Kitchen wall cabinets are not too high to be easily reached.
- _____ Lighting of counter tops is enough for meal preparation.
- _____ Light switches are located near the doors
- _____ Shiny or glaring work surfaces are not used.
- _____ Oven controls are clearly marked and easily grasped.
- _____ Oven controls are located on the front or side of the oven, so that you don't have to reach over the burners.
- _____ A single-lever mixing faucet is used. This type of faucet controls both the hot and cold water flow with a single control.
- _____ Flooring is not slippery and has a non-glare surface.
- _____ When cooking, pan handles are turned away from other burners and the edge of the range.
- _____ When cooking, you do not wear garments with long, loose sleeves.
- _____ Hot pads and pan holders are kept near the range.
- _____ If you have a microwave, it is operated only when there is food in it.
- _____ Small appliances are unplugged when not in use.
- _____ Knives are kept in a knife rack or drawer.
- _____ Countertops and work areas are cleared of all unnecessary objects.
- _____ Drawers and cupboards are kept closed.
- _____ A sturdy, stable stepladder or step stool is used rather than a chair to reach objects in overhead cabinets.
- _____ Grease or liquid spills are wiped up at once.

Stairways and Halls

- _____ Steps are in good condition and are free of objects.
- _____ Steps have non-skid strips. Carpeting on steps is securely fastened and free of fraying or holes.
- _____ Smoke detectors are in place in hallways and near sleeping areas.
- _____ Hallways are equipped with night-lights.
- _____ Sturdy handrails are on both sides of stairway 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 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.
- _____ Stairways and hallways are well lighted.

Living Room

- _____ Electrical cords are placed along walls (not under rugs) and away from traffic areas.
- _____ Chairs and sofas are sturdy and secure.
- _____ Chairs and sofas are not too low or too deep to get in and out of easily.
- _____ Chairs and sofas 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, which might be used for support when walking or rising, is steady and does not tilt.

Bathroom

- _____ The bathtub or shower has a non-skid mat or strips on the standing area.
- _____ Bathtub or shower doors are safety glass or plastic.
- _____ Grab bars are installed on the walls by the bathtub and toilet.
- _____ The towel bars and the soap dish in the shower stall are durable and are firmly installed.
- _____ A single-lever mixing faucet is used, or you have faucet handles that are easy to grasp.

- _____ Bathroom flooring is matte-finished, textured tile, or low pile commercial carpet (no throw rugs or bathmats).
- _____ Bathroom has even lighting without glare. The light switch is 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.

Bedroom

- _____ A lamp or flashlight is kept within reach of your bed. Check batteries periodically to make sure they are working, and keep a spare package of batteries nearby.
- _____ A night-light is used to brighten the way to the bathroom at night.
- _____ Plenty of room is left for you to walk around the bed.
- _____ You have an adequate-sized nightstand or small table for the telephone, glasses, or other important items.
- _____ There is a sturdy chair with arms where you can sit to dress.
- _____ You have wall-to-wall low pile carpeting or a smooth surface floor.
- _____ Your bedroom is located on the first floor of the home. A telephone jack is installed in the room.

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.
- _____ Garage doors are easy for you to operate, even when snow is piled against them.
- _____ The garage is adequately ventilated.

If you find that your home does need changes in order to make it safe, you may want to hire a home repair contractor or handyman. It is important to select a reputable contractor. Here are a few guidelines to help protect you:

1. Ask friends to recommend repair contractors.
2. Get at least three written estimates for the project. Most contractors give free estimates.
3. Ask for and check references.
4. If licensing is required in your area, ask to see the contractor's license. Also ask for proof of insurance and bonding.
5. Do not pay the contractor in full before the work is done. Some contractors will ask for a small down payment, which is permissible.
6. Get a signed written agreement before work begins or money is exchanged. The agreement should specify both work and payment schedules. It should also detail the type of work to be completed.
7. Do not make final payments on the project until the work has been performed to your satisfaction.
8. Check with the Better Business Bureau or the attorney general's office if you have questions or complaints about a contractor.

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