

Seniors ‘aging in place’

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Remaining active and independent is very important to America’s seniors. This also means seniors intend to ‘age in place.’ They want to remain in their homes and in their communities. The Journal of Housing for the Elderly has reported approximately “70 percent of seniors spend the rest of their life in the place where they celebrated their 65th birthday.”

While various studies give slightly different data, the National Safety Council has estimated that 54 percent of all fatal falls for America’s seniors are falls which occurred at home.

Many non-fatal injuries due to falls can cause the patient to lose at least one level of mobility, meaning if you were using a cane, you now will be having to use a walker or a wheel chair. If you have been living at home, you may even have to move into an assisted living facility.

In addition to remaining as physically active as possible (as discussed in my last article), seniors and their families need to make a careful evaluation of the home. Most homes are built for younger, more physically able adults. Some modification may be necessary to make the home as safe as possible as seniors living in the house continue to age.

No matter how good-looking a floor may be, any floor surface which tends to become slippery, especially when wet, needs to be replaced.

Examine all walkways, including around furniture to identify any potential cause for someone to trip and fall. Keep these areas free of clutter, including newspapers, magazines, shoes, clothing, lap blankets, throw rugs, and electric cords.

If necessary, rearrange furniture to allow for more open walkways, better lighting, safer lighting, and less clutter.

Give consideration to the height and design of chairs commonly used by the seniors in the home. Sturdy, durable chairs with good arm rests are important. The chair should be comfortable to sit in and should be easy when moving from standing to sitting and vice versa.

What is the height of the senior’s bed? It should be easy to get out of safely, but not too high.

Reorganize closets, cabinets, and other storage areas, putting items most often used within easy reach. Closets can now have pull down clothing rods installed, and cabinets can have pull out drawers, allowing for safer access to contents. It is important to avoid having to use a step stool or ladder as much as possible.

Give special consideration to stairs. Handrails should be on both sides of the stairs, running the entire length of the stairwell.

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For non-carpeted stairs, what can you do to make the wood or other surface less slippery?

Have an electrician install good lighting at the top and bottom of the stairs, with a light switch at the top and bottom as well.

Consider installing motion detectors which can turn the lights on automatically.

Also give thought to having electric outlets moved up higher on the wall, making them easier for seniors to reach.

Improve the lighting throughout the house. Saving on the electricity bill with lower luminosity light bulbs is not a good idea for aging eyes. Fluorescent and CFC bulbs are lower wattage but provide plenty of light. The major drawback with these bulbs is the extra time they require to 'warm up' and reach full luminosity.

Install grab bars in the tub and toilet areas, being sure the wall is sturdy enough to hold. Many seniors object to such grab bars because they look too much like what is in hospitals. Consider doing some shopping for ones that are more decorative, but still functional.

Look at the walking surfaces around the outside of the house. The surface should be smooth, not be slippery when wet, and have no uneven edges. Any steps should be highlighted in a contrasting color. Consider also making the steps have a 'glow in the dark' appearance.

There are many other things you might want to consider in making a senior's home safer, but if you do just what is listed here, you will have made substantial improvements towards being able to enjoy the home for years to come.

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