

Partners in Care

By Lisa M. Petsche

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Help a Loved One Remain in Their Home

When asked, most older adults say they'd prefer to stay in their home for the rest of their life, in order to maximize their comfort and preserve their independence.

While no one knows what the future holds, there are many things that you, as a caregiver, can do to maximize the chances that your aging relative can remain safe and well in their current environment. Read on to learn about some of them.

In the Kitchen

- Locate regularly used pots, dishes, staple foods and other supplies within easy reach. Ensure the heaviest items are stored in the lower cupboards.
- Get them a microwave oven for easy cooking and heating of prepared food.
- Small appliances, such as kettles, should have an automatic shut-off feature as well as simple controls, large dials or buttons and easy-to-read labels.

In the Bedroom

- Situate a lamp within reach of their bed. It should be easy to turn on and off.
- Arrange for a phone at their bedside. If their bedroom doesn't have a phone jack, get a cordless phone so they can keep the receiver with them at night - and wherever they spend their time during the day.
- Assist them in obtaining an adjustable bed, to maximize their comfort and facilitate mobility.
- Ensure there's a clear path from their bed to the bathroom.

In the Bathroom

- Have grab bars installed by the toilet and in the bathtub or shower area. Ensure they're placed in the proper location and well anchored to the wall.
- Get a rubber mat (the kind with suction cups) for the tub or shower, and a non-skid bath mat for the floor.
- Get a bathtub seat or shower chair.
- Obtain a raised toilet seat if they have trouble getting on and off the toilet.
- Get a hand-held shower head so they can shower sitting down.
- Consider installing a walk-in bathtub or shower. Models are available with a variety of features, such as a retractable hand-held shower and whirlpool jets.



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In Stairwells

- Steps should be in good repair and have a non-skid surface.
- Have solid handrails installed on both sides of stairways – ideally these should project past the top and bottom steps.
- Keep steps free of clutter.
- Ensure stairwells are well lit. If necessary, get battery-powered dome lights that easily attach to the wall.
- Get a chair lift if it's hard for them to navigate stairs and they must do so daily. Equipment is available for all types of stair configurations. Some companies sell reconditioned models, which can make the cost more manageable.

Outdoors

- Install handrails on both sides of any entrance steps.
- Have an entrance ramp built or a porch lift installed if necessary.
- Install an exterior light with an automatic timer or a sensor, and affix house numbers that are easy to see from the street.
- Arrange for a property maintenance service to tend their lawn and garden and clear snow in the winter.

General Tips

- Ensure throw rugs and scatter mats have a non-skid backing. Better yet, remove them, since they're one of the most common causes of falls.
- Use night lights in the bedroom, hallways and bathroom. Get the kind that have a motion sensor or that automatically turn on in dim lighting conditions. Also get a couple of plug-in, rechargeable flashlights that automatically come on when the power goes out.
- Spend some time browsing in medical supply stores or perusing their online catalogs to discover the many items available – reachers and electric-lift armchairs, for example – that can increase household safety and make everyday activities easier.
- Arrange for a home assessment by an occupational therapist if you would like more information about identifying potential safety hazards and successfully addressing them. The therapist may point out areas of risk and make recommendations that would not have occurred to you or your relative. Your local office on aging can advise how to access these professionals.
- Arrange for a personal emergency response service, whereby your relative wears a lightweight, waterproof pendant or bracelet that has a button to press if they run into a crisis and need help. Studies have found that getting help quickly after a fall reduces the risk of hospitalization and death.



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If your relative's home is accessible but he or she cannot be left alone for long periods of the day, you may wish to investigate the option of private duty home care support from hourly or live-in caregivers.