

Home Sweet Home for the Physically Challenged and Elderly

Maybe you've lived in your home for years and can't imagine living anywhere else. Or perhaps moving to an assisted living facility is the last thing you want. Whatever the reason, it's possible to avoid changing where you live by making a few changes to the way you live.

With some assistance, and the information in this informative sheet, you can create a safe home environment for yourself. This is not meant to be a comprehensive guide to remaining in your own home, but rather a starting point as you begin to explore the possibilities that lie ahead.

With a Little Help...

Your master plan for staying independent in your own home begins with one step—one step that might not be so simple: accepting help. For many of us, accepting help and support from friends, family and the community is not always an easy thing to do.

Accepting help is not an admission of defeat—it's anything but! Instead, think of it as a strong and determined declaration of your independence. If you want to continue living in the home you love, you do whatever it takes to make that happen.

First, discuss your master plan with friends, family and neighbors. Let them know it's your desire to live independently. Tell them that you want to remain in your own home and explain why this is important to you. An open, matter-of-fact conversation makes your wish clear. It also lets everyone know that you understand you may require assistance to make that wish a reality. Discuss various ways they can take part, as well as alternative ways your needs can be met.

Family First

Many people choose a family member to be their primary helper or caregiver. If this is your preference, think about which family member would be best suited to being more involved with helping you remain at home. Be sure to take their

personal and professional obligations into consideration. Another option to discuss is having two or more family member's team up to help you. Then talk with them about ways they might help. Encourage them to be honest about how they feel. Assure them you will do the same. Discuss the level of care you have in mind, so everything is clear up front.

Neighbors Helping Neighbors

Whether they're right next door or across the street, your neighbors can be a major source of comfort. Simply knowing there is a willing, caring resource nearby can put your mind at ease.

Neighbors can:

- be "on call" in case of emergency. (Make sure they have a door key, know your alarm codes and are aware of vital medication or health information.)
- help out with minor house repairs, light gardening, house cleaning, or laundry.
- run errands like picking up groceries or prescriptions.
- help you with things they're already doing (like mowing your lawn when they mow theirs, buying grocery items for you when they make a trip to the store, shoveling snow for your sidewalks, etc.).
- get to know you better and stay in regular contact with your family members.

Creating a Positive Caregiver Experience

Appointing someone as your caregiver can make it much easier to remain in your home. Some caregivers are family members, some are close friends or neighbors, some are even professionals. Determining the best person to take on this important role depends on your preference and your personal situation.

Personal Information

If your caregiver happens to be a trusted family member, you might want them to have greater access to your personal information than you would give a neighbor or a professional.

When it comes to information about your finances, legal documents and medical records, only provide enough access to help you without putting you and your information at risk. Talk about how much involvement is necessary and be specific about things you want to handle yourself. Do you want to balance your own accounts? Do you need help paying bills?

Let your caregiver know where important papers like wills, insurance policies, and billing statements can be found. If they are in a safety deposit box at the bank, be sure they know where you keep the key and the bank's location. You might also check with the bank to see if you need to give written permission for your caregiver to access your deposit box and accounts.

About Your Health

Make sure your caregiver knows all the important details of your medical situation. Advise caregivers of scheduled appointments with the doctor. Show your caregiver where you keep your prescription bottles. Talk about what you are taking and the dosage amounts, as well as when your prescription drugs need to be taken and refilled. Tell your caregiver about your health insurance or Medicare coverage. Maybe they could even help make sure you're getting all the coverage to which you are entitled.

Most of all, it's important to let your caregiver know of any changes in how you are feeling and how your conditions may be progressing.

Transportation Needs

If driving yourself is no longer an option, you don't have to be stuck in the house all day. It's important to get out and about, so talk to your caregiver about planning some outings that you enjoy—go on a grocery trip, head to the mall or the library, or spend some time at the park with the grandkids.

Then, discuss the best ways for you to get there. Is public transportation an option? What about carpooling with a neighbor? Or is your caregiver available to give you a ride?

If you use a power chair or scooter, a vehicle lift makes it easy to take it with you anywhere you want to go.

Caregiver Options

If you need to look outside your circle of family and friends, there are many local organizations, and chapters of national organizations, that can help.

Religious Organizations

Churches, temples and other places of worship organize volunteers to help with everything from delivering a meal to getting you to your doctor's appointment to just spending some time visiting with you. Ask at your place of worship or talk with friends and neighbors to find ones near you.

Visiting Angels

This national network of non-medical, private-duty home care agencies has a wonderful reputation for providing various levels of care and focus to help seniors continue to live in their own homes. www.visitingangels.com

Meals on Wheels

Probably one of the more familiar names, Meals on Wheels will deliver two meals a day, seven days a week, including holidays, to seniors age 60 and over who are unable to ensure adequate nutrition for themselves.

www.mowaa.org

Grocery Delivery

Some grocery stores will deliver to seniors who aren't able to drive, so check with your local store or the internet.

Keeping Things Running Smoothly

Keeping your home in good condition can be a lot of work, so don't be afraid to recruit help here as well. Your caregiver may be able to help you with some of your household maintenance, but hiring a lawn service or professional handyman are options as well.

This seasonal maintenance checklist can help you keep track of what things need to be done around your house, beyond the basics.

- Trim tree branches when appropriate to make sure they don't rub against the house.

- Have gutters cleaned out twice a year to keep them from stopping up, as clogged gutters can lead to overflow and foundation problems. Consider installing leaf guards and downspout extensions to direct water away from the house.
- Have roofing inspected after hail or high winds, and replace shingles if necessary.
- Have heating and air-conditioning filters changed a minimum of once a year. Change out ceiling vent filters monthly.
- Have your furnace inspected by a heating and air-conditioning professional before the first cold snap. Have your air-conditioning inspected each spring.
- Have your water heater inspected regularly. If you have a hot-water radiator, have the valves regularly bled.
- Cap your chimney to prevent birds from nesting or gaining entry through the fireplace. This keeps out rodents and bats as well.

A Few Changes Can Make A Big Difference

In general, there are modifications you can make throughout your home that can make living on your own at home safer and easier. Here are some to consider:

- Switch out door knobs with lever door handles. (They are easier to open.)
- Replace plush or shag carpeting with commercial-grade carpet to prevent tripping.
- Remove non-load-bearing walls to create more open space.
- Pad furniture that has sharp corners or edges.
- Increase the wattage in your light bulbs to provide additional light (but never use more wattage than recommended on your light fixture).
- Increase the amount of overall light in your home by adding skylights.

Your Bathroom

Many falls occur in the bathroom. While you want to be safe, your privacy is important, too. Here are some options that may be of help:

- Consider a bathtub lift, or have a grab bar installed on the wall or the edge of the bathtub. This makes it easier and safer to get in and out of the bathtub. Use slip-free mats and consider installing a waterproof phone for emergencies. Tub benches also make bathing safer.
- If you prefer showering, you could modify your bathroom with a walk-in shower. Without a lip to stumble over, a walk-in shower is much safer to navigate. Add a shower chair so you don't have to stand for too long. Multiple showerheads can be installed at variable heights, or consider a handheld showerhead for easy water control.
- Other bathroom modifications include expanding the dimensions of the room itself for easier maneuvering and having the sink lowered for better access.
- Toilet lifts, toilet chairs with rails, and strategically placed grab handles can increase your independence in the bathroom while protecting your safety and privacy.

Your Bedroom and Closet

- Make light switches easier to reach from your bed by relocating them. They should be between 36" and 40" above the floor. Switches next to doors and inside closets may also be relocated for easier access.
- If your bed or bedframe raises your mattress to a height that makes climbing in or out difficult, consider changing to a metal frame or setting a lower leg height. If you still have trouble, install a bed railing or a grab bar on the wall next to the bed.
- Modify the clothing bar height in your closet so clothes hang lower and are easier to reach. Use upper racks or shelves for storing things you won't need on a daily basis.
- Make sure there is a clear path from the bed to the bathroom. Nightlights low to the ground and close to the bathroom can help. Check the carpeting for obstacles and remove loose rugs.
- If traveling between bed and the bathroom in the middle of the night worries you, install night lights to make it easier and safer.

Your Kitchen

Most of us spend a lot of time in our kitchen, and modifying this room can make living on your own much easier.

- Remove any loose throw rugs. Not only could you slip on them, they could get caught on a walker or on the wheels of a wheelchair, power chair, or scooter.
- Store items you use daily in lower cabinets. Use higher ones for things you use infrequently.
- Consider lowering the height of your countertops.
- Install a sink with knee clearance and a raised dishwasher.
- Lower the cooking surfaces.
- Mount a wall oven or microwave at a more easily reachable height.
- Create a desk or work area with knee clearance.

Alerts and Alarm Systems

Having an easy, fast way to contact emergency assistance is not only safer, it will make you feel more at ease about living on your own.

- If your home does not already have an alarm system with buttons that instantly connect you with emergency services, consider having one installed. But the best security system won't do you any good if you don't use it—so activate your alarm every night when you go to bed and when you leave the house.
- Consider a personal medical alert device that is worn on your body.
- Make sure at least one of your alarm systems includes a separate "panic button" that can be installed close to your bed and/or in the bathroom.
- Install carbon monoxide detectors in your bedroom and in the hallway outside your bedroom.
- Make a plan to routinely check alarm system batteries. If your alarm system is patched into the electrical system, it should still have battery back-ups that will need changing. A good rule of thumb is to replace them every six months.
- **If you have trouble remembering to take medication, medical alarms can be set up to dispense the proper dosage and even to call you if you miss a dose.**

Easily

Making Things Simpler and Safer

Remaining independent in your home can be difficult when just walking across the floor leaves you out of breath. In order to avoid moving to an assisted living facility, you need to be able to do things for yourself: get to the kitchen to fix a meal, to your bedroom to get dressed, or to the bathroom without needing help. Plus, you need to be able to get from room to room without the risk of getting hurt from a fall.

By taking advantage of various products designed to make it easier for you to get around, and by following some simple safety tips, it is possible to continue living where you're most comfortable.

General Tips:

- Move furniture out of areas you use frequently or rearrange the furniture to create clear paths.
- Tack down or don't use throw rugs. Not only could you slip on them, they could get caught on a walker or the wheels of a power chair or scooter.
- Make sure extension cords are tucked away or under rubber runners.
- Be sure there is enough light in every room. Increase the wattage in your light bulbs to provide additional light (but never use more bulb wattage than recommended on the light fixture).
- Put night lights in hallways and on stairways.
- Instead of wearing slippery socks, wear house shoes with a firm rubber sole for good traction.
- Keep clutter off the floor.

Thresholds, Entryways and Ramps

Going from room to room is easier when there are no steps or thresholds to navigate.

- Install a ramp directly over steps to make getting in the front or back door easier.
- Alter thresholds at outside doors and between interior rooms to be less intrusive and more easily crossed with a wheelchair or a power chair.

- Use rubber threshold covers to create a bump-free transition between rooms.

Motion-Activated Light

This is a light that automatically turns on as you approach. Some brands run on batteries so they require no electricity or complicated installation. Put one on the front porch, in the attic, or in the closet for extra light.