

Tips for making a home safe for aging in place

JUL 6, 2023

10:51 AM

If home is where the heart is, it's no surprise the vast majority of seniors want to stay put as they grow older in the homes where they raised their families. Often, it's a good option, considering the cost and stress of moving to a nursing home or assisted living facility.

Not only is the space familiar, and often paid for, but allowing an aging parents to stay in their own homes reinforces their sense of independence.

A whopping 77% of Americans 50 and older want to remain in their current homes, according to an AARP [2021 survey](#) — despite the fact that many homes lack key features such as a first-floor bedroom or bath to accommodate older residents' special needs.

As we age, we don't see or hear as well, and we also lose strength. Weakening leg muscles can make older adults less sure on their feet, leading to trouble walking, reaching into cupboards and climbing stairs.

Every year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 30 million older Americans trip and fall — one fall every second of every day — with one in five falls causing serious harm. [Falls](#), in fact, are the leading cause of injury-related death among adults 65 and older.

You're ahead of the game if mom or dad's house is among the [10% of homes](#) in the U.S. — and only 6% in Pennsylvania — the U.S. Census Bureau considers "aging ready" with senior-friendly features like a step-free entryway, wider doorways, a built-in shower seat or a wheelchair-accessible kitchen. But in Pittsburgh, more than half of all homes were built before 1940 and not specifically designed to help aging adults live independently.

Short of a major construction project, what can you do to make your older family member's home safe? The following tips and quick fixes should help:

Aging in place, aging-ready homes



77% of Americans 50 and older want to remain in their current homes.



Falls

30 million older Americans trip and fall every year, the leading cause of injury-related deaths among adults 65+.



That's one fall every second of every day.

One in five falls causes serious harm



Aging-ready homes

Senior-friendly features include:

- Step-free entryway
- Wider doorways
- Built-in shower seat
- First-floor bedroom
- First-floor bath
- Easy-to-reach cupboards
- Wheelchair-accessible kitchen

Percent of homes that are aging-ready



MAKING A HOME SAFE FOR AGING IN PLACE

The following tips and quick fixes should help to make an older family member's home safer:

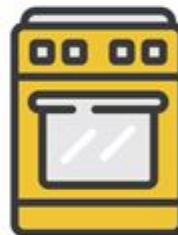
Minimize potential falls

- Get rid of scatter rugs (easy to trip on).
- Secure area rugs with nonskid carpet pads or double-sided carpet tape.
- Use a non-slip or rubber mat around the sink.
- Apply slip-resistant strips or shapes in shower and bathtub.



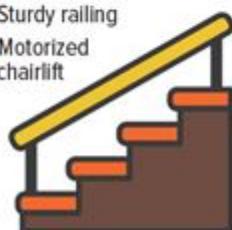
Kitchen

- Jar opener or gripper pad
- Kitchen shears
- Reacher-grabber tool
- Stove with safety features
- Stove burner alert that beeps and blinks at pre-programmed intervals when burner is on, with or without a flame
- Countertop microwave: handle not push-button, knobs not buttons, large digital timer clock instead of touchpad
- Slide-out drawers/trays in existing cabinets for easier access
- Smaller containers for milk, cooking oil and dishwashing liquid
- Most-used refrigerator items placed on the easy-to-reach middle shelf
- Lower door handles added for wheelchair-bound
- Work station for sitting while doing cooking tasks



Make stairs safer

- Securely attached carpet runners
- Non-slip treads or strips on wood stairs
- Bright lighting/wall night-lights along stairs
- Clear, clutter-free path
- Sturdy railing
- Motorized chairlift



Bed and bath

- Move bedroom downstairs.
- Bed that is easy to get in and out of
- Bed rails
- Install grab bars in shower and next to toilet.
- Install raised toilet seat.
- Replace a traditional showerhead with a hand-held nozzle and place a small stool in the shower for sitting while soaping and rinsing.



Getting around

- Clear pathways to avoid tripping.
- Check for furniture, accessories that obstruct pathways.
- Secure electrical cords to the wall.
- Replace round doorknobs with lever-style handles.
- Higher-wattage lighting for entrances, exits, hallways, near steps and pathways
- Automatic light timers, motion-sensor or stick-on battery-operated lights to avoid entering dark spaces
- Stash of flashlights throughout the home in case of a power outage (regularly check batteries)

For starters, ensure they are safe from falls.

Get rid of scatter rugs (they're easy to trip on) and secure area rugs by placing a nonskid carpet pad under each, or securing edges with double-sided carpet tape.

It's also a good idea to place a non-slip or rubber mat around the sink, and place slip-resistant strips or shapes in the shower and bathtub. A raised toilet seat will also help those who struggle with getting on and off the toilet on their own.

Steps are another challenge. Your loved one might not be able to afford a motorized chairlift to get to the second floor, but there are ways to make going up stairs less risky. If the steps have carpet runners, make sure they're securely attached; to prevent wipeouts on wood stairs, add non-slip treads or strips.

As elsewhere in the house, it's also essential to keep stairs safe with bright lighting (wall night-lights can help) and a clear, clutter-free path. Installing a sturdy railing will provide stability.

Speaking of clutter, take a hard look at furniture and accessories and get rid of anything that obstructs pathways. Getting from the living room to the kitchen shouldn't involve an obstacle course. Secure electrical cords to the wall to avoid tripping.

If your parent is still cooking, consider replacing the stove with one with safety features or add a burner alert that beeps and blinks at pre-programmed intervals when a burner is on, with or without a flame.

As for the microwave, a countertop model with a door handle will be easier for aging hands to open than one with a push button, and it should also boast knobs instead of buttons for setting cooking times. Also, a large digital timer clock instead of a touchpad is easier to see.

Senior-friendly kitchen tools such as a jar opener or gripper pad, a pair of kitchen shears and reacher-grabber tool will make life easier and less frustrating, and if you add slide-out drawers/trays to existing cabinets, silverware and cooking utensils will be easier to access.

It also helps to ditch the full-size quarts of milk, cooking oil and dishwashing liquid (and everything else that comes in a bottle) for smaller items. Sure, they cost more on a price-per-ounce basis, but smaller bottles weigh less and are easier for arthritic hands to grasp and carry.

When helping to stock the fridge, place the items your loved one uses most on the middle shelf so they're easy to reach. Add lower door handles if they're in a wheelchair.

It's also great to have some sort of work station where mom or dad can sit while they do cooking tasks.

Your senior might balk at moving a bedroom downstairs but wherever they sleep, make sure the bed is easy to get in and out of. Installing bed rails can help with agility issues, as well as keep them from rolling out.

To make bathing and toileting more secure, install grab bars in the shower and next to the toilet. Also, consider replacing a traditional showerhead with a hand-held nozzle and place a small stool inside the shower so they can sit while soaping and rinsing.

If there's a budget and your loved one is in a wheelchair or uses a walker, consider hiring a contractor to widen doorways to a "clear width" of 32 inches so they have no trouble getting through.

Because traditional round doorknobs can be tough for people with dexterity issues, switch them out for lever-style handles.

As for lighting, the higher the wattage the better — not just inside but also in entrances, exits and pathways. Add automatic timers and they'll never have to walk into a dark space. Motion-sensor or stick-on battery-operated nightlights in hallways and near steps are also a godsend. Also, have a stash of flashlights throughout the home in case of a power outage, and make sure to regularly check the batteries.

Gretchen McKay: gmckay@post-gazette.com, 412-263-1419 or on Twitter [@gtmckay](https://twitter.com/gtmckay).

First Published July 6, 2023, 5:30am