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Tuesday, June 9, 2009

The Parent Trap

Uncovering the Hidden Dangers in Aging Loved Ones' Homes

CONTRIBUTED FOR HOME INSTEAD SENIOR CARE • JUNE 9, 2009

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June is National Home Safety Month, and local senior care experts are encouraging adult children to add a simple, yet important duty to their list of summer chores: Conduct a "look and see" inspection of their parent's home

"Many seniors and their families don't think about the fact that homes must adapt to the changing needs of seniors as they age until an accident happens," said Bob Bird, owner of the Home Instead Senior Care office serving New Castle County.

"There are many potential hazards that could force seniors to lose their independence. Important safety areas to highlight in a senior's home run the gamut from accessibility to lighting to trip and fall hazards. A lack of attention to those details can jeopardize an older adult's ability to remain at home," Bird said.

Many home safety improvements are simple and inexpensive, experts say. Convincing seniors, on the other hand, is another story. Danise Levine, assistant director of the IDEA Center at the SUNY (State University of New York) Buffalo School of Architecture, said that denial often comes into play with seniors.

"We see a lot of seniors who don't want to admit they're getting older so they don't want to make changes in their homes," Levine said. "Secondly, consumer education is an issue. If older adults do need help they often don't know where to go or how much things cost."

Bird said it's important to identify various safety pitfalls from poor lighting to the need for adaptive devices in a home. While many fixes are simple and inexpensive, others might involve a remodeling project to help a senior remain at home.

"That first, important step is to make an objective assessment of what needs to be done to keep them at home," Bird said. "It's one of the most important services that Home Instead Senior Care provides."

For more information or to obtain a free home safety checklist, contact the local Home Instead Senior Care Office at 302-654-4003.

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Look and See Signs
A Home Safety Assessment and Checklist

Seniors and their families might want to look for the following opportunities when performing a home safety assessment.

√ Examine dark pathways, corners and other areas where seniors regularly walk or read. Make sure all areas of the home have adequate lighting. Timed and motion-sensor lights outdoors can illuminate potentially dangerous pathways. Inside, consider Ott-Lites – which provide a high-intensity beam for doing detail work.

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Make sure that hallways and stairs are properly lit.

√ Avoid monochromatic color schemes. Contrast can help seniors with failing eyesight better navigate their homes. Large red and blue buttons over hot and cold water faucet controls will help prevent dangerous mistakes. A dark green or brown toilet seat and vinyl tape around the shower will make those fixtures more easily distinguished. Kitchen countertops should contrast with floors as well.

√ Look for ways to reorganize. Mom always put the black stew pot under the stove to keep the kids from breaking it. Perhaps now it belongs on a shelf beside the stove. And who says the eggs must go in the egg tray of the [refrigerator](#)? Perhaps it's easier for dad to handle them if they're stored in the meat tray. If that hallway table, which has always been a permanent fixture, is becoming a dangerous obstacle, relocate it.

√ Look behind closed doors. Many seniors will close off parts of a house they no longer use. Be sure to check those areas regularly for mold or water damage. Don't close vents to crawl spaces.

√ Look for ways to simplify your senior's life. Talk to your parents about why and how they do things then look for ways to simplify their lives. If your Mom's immaculate floors are now regularly dirty, think about how she's been doing that job all these years and offer options.

Rather than a heavy mop and bucket, investigate light-weight, all-in-one mops. If your senior is replacing appliances, look for smooth-top stoves and [refrigerators](#) with water and ice on the outside. Change door knobs to levers, or purchase grips that can go on conventional knobs. Convert single-bulb light fixtures to multiple bulbs so seniors still have light when one bulb burns out.

√ Consider security. Think about the potential dangers that lurk within your loved one's home. Lock-in switches on thermostats and stoves will keep seniors with dementia and Alzheimer's disease from harming themselves. Help them manage in their environment by installing a cordless intercom.

√ Keep an eye out for damage. Watch for signs that a senior is adapting his or her behavior to the environment. Look for towel bars or window sills that are pulling away or shower curtains that have torn from seniors using them to grab onto.

√ Look for ways to make entries safe. Make sure that railings into a home are in good repair and that steps and sidewalks are not damaged. Or eliminate steps altogether. Make sure that doors into a home can be set to stay open for carrying groceries and other items in and out. Install remote control locks.

√ Is clutter taking over? Messy conditions and broken items are important warning signs. Remove area rugs and stacks of newspapers and magazines, or other potential obstacles.

√ Contact a professional senior-care [service](#), such as Home Instead Senior Care, which can conduct a home safety assessment and serve as a second set of eyes for older adults.

This list was adapted from the home safety checklist developed by Home Instead Senior Care and enhanced in cooperation with the SUNY Buffalo School of Architecture IDEA Center, the National Association of Home Builders—Remodelers CAPS (Certified Aging in Place Specialists), the National Aging in Place Council, and aging-in-place [consultant](#) Louis Tenenbaum.

What You Can Do For Your Senior . . .
For \$500 or Less

Following are adaptive devices you can easily install and add to a senior's home for a combined total of about \$500. Prices are approximates and may vary by vendor.

1. Raised toilet seats with arms that lock onto an existing toilet provide height and support to stand. \$90
2. Hand-held shower nozzle slips directly over a tub faucet. \$24
3. Floor to ceiling grab bar provides a full range of heights to hold onto while sitting or standing up. It can be installed by the bed, in the bathroom or by a favorite chair. \$150
4. Lever doorknob turner adapters attach securely to a variety of round door knobs to provide leverage for easy opening. \$22
5. Lever handles attach to recliner chair handles to serve as an extension. \$22
6. Various kitchen items are available including automatic openers that remove lids and open cans, jars and bottles. \$50
7. Rubber ramps that are ADA compliant are often easy to install to most surfaces. Ramp stays in place by its sheer weight and can be moved from one opening to another. \$36
8. Mobile stools are particularly useful to help seniors navigate a kitchen. \$100

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