

Safety-proofing of the home important step towards independent living for seniors

*By Anne Lautzenheiser
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According to Len Snyder of Home Instead Senior Care, one of the most dangerous items in an elderly person's home is often an innocent-looking accessory.

"Throw rugs," said Snyder. "A senior can trip over a throw rug faster than you can blink."

Snyder tells of a new client who recently fell and broke a hip after catching her foot on a throw rug. Now the woman requires the assistance of a walker, making the smallest task seem that much more difficult. Her son, a doctor, recruited Snyder to outfit the house with safety features.

As the baby boomer population ages, more and more seniors are fighting to maintain their independence.

Several industry surveys report that as much as 90 percent of seniors say they want to remain at home in their later years, leaving sons and daughters with growing concerns about their ability to do so safely.

The fears are well founded, as many seniors and their families often don't spot the potential hazards until an accident happens, as was the case with Snyder's client and her son.

"She didn't know how to ask for assistance, and he didn't recognize the things that could be a problem," he said. "Recognizing these things before an accident happens is key."

The company does a thorough safety inspection of each client's home, reviewing more than 50 different items. Areas such as the bathroom, bedroom or kitchen often receive additional scrutiny, as these are usually areas where the client spends the most time.

Things like safety bars in the bathtub, or removing trip and fall hazards might be obvious, but other items to consider are adequate lighting, lifting recliners and an elevated toilet seat.

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 State University of New York/Buffalo School of Architecture, said 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."

Siblings are often scattered around the country, making it difficult to check on a parent regularly. Other family members can also be in denial about a loved one's physical decline.

Snyder notes the importance of keeping the lines of communication open and to notice any changes in appearance, like frequent bruising. It could be a result of certain medications, but it might mean the elderly person is becoming unsteady on their feet.

Communication is especially important on the issue of driving, often an area of particular concern.

"You don't want to see them get hurt, nor anyone else," he said. "It's so important to have the conversation before ability starts to decline."