

Elder-Proof the Home
By Kate McCarthy

Marge's falls usually occurred in her bathroom. She frequently ended up bumped, bruised and scolded for not being more careful. The time her head narrowly missed the porcelain tub got her family to really take a look at what was causing the problem. It turned out that the doorway was unusually narrow and the door opened into the bathroom room making it even more difficult for Marge to enter. In addition, the lever on the bathroom door would constantly catch on Marge's bathrobe sleeve as she made her way into the room which threw her off balance. A simple fix of changing the hinges so the door opened outward increased the space and eliminated the possibility of the lever catching on her clothes. To the relief of Marge and her entire family, the falls stopped.



Make the home a safe place for the elderly

Most elderly live in fear of falling. Falls and other household accidents put elders at risk and are often the reason staying at home independently becomes impossible. Making the home a safe place for our elders can make all the difference in being able to age in place at home rather than having to move to an institutionalized setting. Most families think nothing of child-proofing their home when their families are young. The same concept holds true for the aging. A couple of simple and relatively inexpensive renovations can make all the difference in the overall safety for your elderly loved one.

Bathroom:

The combination of smooth floor surfaces and water make the bathroom one of the most dangerous rooms in the house, so it is important that this room be updated to safely accommodate the elderly.

- Install bathroom doors to open outwards so there is room to maneuver through thresholds. Doorways should be 32" to 36" in width to accommodate those in wheelchairs or using walkers.
- Lower the height of cabinets, countertops and mirrors a few inches to accommodate those in wheelchairs or with walkers. Insulate hot pipes under the countertops so those confined to wheelchairs don't burn themselves when seated near the sink.
- Allow 30" to 48" of open space in front of all fixtures in the bathroom, including sinks, toilet, tub and shower.
- Install grab bars parallel to the floor (or at a slight diagonal) next to the toilet and in the tub and shower. Install a vertical grab bar near the shower door for entering and leaving the shower stall.
- Raise toilet seats to at least 17" or fit with seat extenders. Toilets should not be placed in small alcoves or too close to other vanities, shower stalls or fixtures so there is plenty of maneuver room near the commode.
- Install walk-in tub with water sealed door or install tub grab bar to provide balance when stepping into the tub. Install stable 17" tub seat, a non-slid tub mat and a hand held showerhead, all which make taking a shower safer and easier for the elderly.
- Turn on a night light in the bathroom at night.

Kitchen:

Kitchens need to be accessible to the elderly which means re-arranging cabinets so commonly used items are in easy reach. Trying to reach items in high cabinets or crouch down to retrieve low for items on the bottom shelves can be very difficult and so organizing the kitchen with elders in mind is a priority.

- Lower wall cabinets by 3" to 5" making shelving accessible. Counter tops should be at 28"- 34" for wheelchair accessibility and at 40" for someone who has trouble bending.
- Move commonly used kitchen items to lower cabinet shelves.

- Install easy access features such as rolling carts and baskets, lazy Susan devices and full extension drawer glides.
- Choose glare-free surfaces so elderly can easily find handles and knobs.
- Install shallow sinks so those in wheelchairs can reach inside.

Lighting:

By the time a senior is in his 60's, there is need of nearly 15% more light than when they were young. Adding more light to hallways and stairs can help avoid falls which can be especially dangerous on stairs.

- Install fixtures which use higher wattage bulbs and use brighter LED lights for added illumination.
- Use ceiling lights that reflect light to the entire room without glare.
- Install sensor light switches which turn on and off when people enter or exit a room. Use dimmer controls which can ease glare for elderly with light sensitivity issues.
- Have hand-held remote controls for a centralized control center near the bed or easy chair.
- Control lights from wall switches with large tilt plates or overhead pulls which are easy to grasp. If a lamp uses a knob, be sure it is large and turns easily. Wall switches should be installed no higher than 48" from the floor so they are accessible to someone confined to a wheelchair.
- Use fluorescent lights in kitchens to illuminate work spaces.
- Install night lights in hallways and bathrooms.
- Use lighter colored lamp shades that emit a brighter ambient light.

Floors & Stairs

It is important to pay attention to the condition of floors and stairs. Slips and falls can be reduced dramatically when basic precautions are put in place,

- Secure carpets or area rugs with grip tape so they don't shift or move. Never allow area rugs over wall to wall carpeting as the rug will edges curl and not sit flat. Remove all area rugs from top or bottom of stairs where a trip may result in serious injury. In many cases it is best to remove area rugs altogether as the uneven surface is often the culprit in the case of falls.

- Position furniture so there is large easy pathways to navigate through. Make sure all transitions from room to room are flat and seamless.
- Get rid of all clutter, electrical cords, hanging tablecloths, draping curtains or pulls from blinds that could get tangled in feet and cause trips and falls.
- Keep small pets out from underfoot.
- Ensure all steps and stairs are even in height and are deep enough to place the entire foot for proper balance.
- Be sure there is a sturdy handrail available for all stairs and steps.
- Install anti-slip tape on stair treads for extra traction.
- Ensure carpeted stairs are properly installed and the carpeting is not sagging or loose.
- Consider a stair lift for people with mobility, strength or balance issues.
- Invest in well fitting shoes with skid-free soles, no to low heels and Velcro straps. Discourage walking on hardwood floors in stocking feet or soft slippers.
- Consider replacing tile or hardwood floors with safer non-skid flooring especially in the bathroom and kitchen areas.

With the cost of institutionalized elder care dramatically increasing, it is a good idea to invest a little now to safeguard your elder's home. Look for grants available in some states that provide assistance with home improvements for lower income elderly. Reduce the risk of accidents and falls for your loved one and they can remain safe and independent at home, the place we all prefer to be.

Sources:

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Kate McCarthy is Director of Operations for HomeAid Health Care which provides services for the elderly who wish to remain safe and independent at home. HomeAid is sister company to Prairie Home Assisted Living which has served the physical, spiritual, mental and health needs of their Residents since 1999. Together the two family owned companies provide comprehensive care for the elderly in the Fox Valley of Wisconsin.