

# Home Safety for Seniors

Our homes should be safe havens from the dangers of the world outside, but even the coziest nest can hold hidden perils. Telephone cords, throw rugs, and slick tile can cause falls or injuries. Frayed wires or a worn-out heater can lead to a house or apartment fire. And if you're an older person who has trouble seeing or walking, you may be more vulnerable to such accidents. But you don't have to feel anxious; by taking some simple steps, you can go a long way toward making your home accident-proof.

One of the most important things you can do is install at least one smoke alarm on every floor of your house, plus a carbon monoxide detector near each of the occupied bedrooms. Both devices can save your life. A smoke alarm, whose batteries should be changed regularly, will give you warning if a fire starts, and a carbon monoxide detector will warn you of the odorless, colorless gas that's as lethal as fire.

Known as the "silent killer," carbon monoxide can leak from a faulty stove, fireplace, or heater, or can seep into a house if a car is left running in the garage. Symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning include fatigue, headache, nausea, and dizziness. (Look for a carbon monoxide detector that's calibrated to show you how much of the gas is present.)

## How can I prevent fires in my home?

Fire poses a grave threat to everyone, but the limited mobility of some seniors puts them at increased risk. Prevention is your best protection.

- Check out your heating system. In 2007 some 47,196 house fires were caused by a heating system flaw, so keep your furnace in good working order. Have it checked once a year, and change filters whenever necessary. Signs of trouble include soot or carbon deposits inside the furnace, stains or rust on the vents or chimney, or a pilot light that won't stay lit or is an unsteady blue flame. Keep small stoves and heaters at a safe distance from flammable materials and furniture.
- Beware of faulty electric cords. Replace worn or frayed cords promptly, and never run them under furniture or carpeting. If you keep cords out of the way by attaching them to the walls, be sure to use tape, not nails or staples, which can damage cords and present further hazards. Make sure three-pronged plugs are used in three-hole outlets or adapters, and see that all outlets have cover plates. Excessively warm outlets or switches may be a sign of dangerous wiring: stop using them right away and call an electrician. Also, be sure to use light bulbs of no more than the maximum wattage indicated on your light fixtures.
- Be alert to fire hazards. Never smoke when you're drowsy or in bed, and use nonflammable nightwear and bedding. And no matter how fond you are of your favorite gown or kimono, don't wear long, loose sleeves while cooking.

## How can I prevent falls in my home?

Falls are the number-one cause of fatal injuries for older people, and even a fracture can put you in the hospital and make it harder to remain independent. But the following precautions should dramatically decrease your chances of taking a spill:

- Watch that telephone cord. Remove any cords that cross the areas where you walk, and consider getting a cordless phone if you like to stroll around while you talk.
- Accident-proof your bathroom. Because it's often soapy, slippery, and wet, the bathroom is one of the most dangerous rooms in your home. Line your bathtub or shower with a nonslip rubber mat or abrasive strips, and consider installing one or more grab bars. Never use a towel rack to steady yourself: it can fall off the wall and take you with it.
- Keep the stairs clear. Never store anything on them, no matter how tempting it is to keep your daily mail there. Apply abrasive strips to each step and install a handrail; even a few steps can be hazardous. And make sure your stairs are well lit by putting a light switch at both the top and the bottom.
- Avoid slippery rugs and runners. Use nonslip backings to keep your rugs or mats from skidding, and remove any that still aren't stable underfoot.
- Light up dark rooms. With adequate illumination, you'll be able to spot hidden obstacles in your path. This is especially important in areas like stairs and basements, where there may be uneven footing. Always keep a night-light on at night, or better yet, have a lamp near your bed so you can turn on the light before getting up.
- Prevent scalds. Set your water heater to "low" (below 120 degrees F) so you won't accidentally scald yourself.
- Keep poisons in their place. Store them away from food products, and clearly label any toxic substances. (Keep them locked up when your grandchildren visit.)
- Beware of falling objects. Store heavy items at waist level for easier handling. If you have trouble lifting things, a small kitchen cart will make transferring dishes to the table or dining room easier and safer.
- Last but not least: Make sure passageways and rooms stay neat and uncluttered, clean up any spills immediately, and wear well-fitting, comfortable shoes. Keep a step stool handy -- and never use an impromptu substitute, like a box or bucket.

## How should I prepare for an emergency?

- Keep emergency phone numbers by the telephone or put them on your speed dial. Place one phone low enough to be reached if an emergency prevents you from standing up. Having a phone within arm's reach of your bed is another good precaution.

- Make sure your address is marked outside in large, clear numbers and that the area is well lit so emergency personnel can find your house quickly.
- If you live alone, you might consider investing in one of the personal emergency response systems. These consist of a button or trigger worn on the body that can be pushed if you need help. They're expensive to buy, though, and require a monthly fee for monitoring. Your children may want to go in on one with you.

**Source: Piaf Azul**

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