

Safely Aging in Place

The needs of older people are not peculiar to them. They are simply an intensification of the needs of the general population – that is, convenience becomes a necessity; safety becomes paramount; and standards for comfort become more exacting.

H.A. Steinberg

Our homes fulfill many needs for us. Obviously our homes provide us with shelter. Our homes also provide us with a storehouse of memories, a place for family interactions, and security and safety. As the years go by, our senses of sight, hearing, touch and smell decline, as does our strength, and our abilities to lift, move and bend. Here are some ways to adapt your home to these physical changes.

Decreased ability to see objects clearly

- Use large, contrasting lettering on clocks and appliance dials.
- Post emergency numbers in large letters near the phone.
- Mark the first and last steps with contrasting colors to make them more visible.

Difficulty seeing in reduced or dim light

- Use a night-light in the bedroom and bathroom.
- Install under-cabinet lights in the kitchen and work areas.
- Use adequate lighting in reading areas, stairs and entryways.
- Paint walls a light color to reflect light.

Decreased hearing and inability to hear high-frequency sounds

- Use amplified phones and closed captioning on TV.
- Install smoke detectors, telephones and doorbells that have blinking lights.
- Use telephones that ring at a different frequency.

Difficulty with glare

- Install vinyl floors with some texture and in slightly darker shades; this causes less glare than smooth, light floors.
- Use a low-buffed wax finish.
- Install carpet; it causes less glare.
- Select glare-reducing, translucent shades.
- Control glare with roof overhangs and trees near windows.

Reduced strength in legs and arms

- Install grab bars around the toilet and bath.
- Keep sleeping, eating and bathing areas on one floor.
- Use sturdy handrails on both sides of the stairs.
- Store heavy items on reachable shelves.
- Make sure windows are easy to open.

Reduced strength in hands and fingers

- Use lever-type door handles and faucet controls.
- Use D-shaped handles on cupboard doors and appliances; they're easier to grasp

- than knobs.
- Install large appliance dials or push-button controls.
- Use touch-on, touch-off table lamps and rocker-type switch plates.

Reduced ability to bend and stoop

- Locate electrical outlets at least 15 inches above the floor.
- Install pull-out shelves in base cabinets.
- Locate the dishwasher and front-loading washer higher than normal.
- Use side-by-side refrigerators to provide storage space that doesn't require bending or reaching.

Decreased flexibility for reaching

- Avoid high cupboards, especially over ranges.
- Install closet rods that are adjustable or at a lower position.
- Be sure drapery pulls are easy to reach.
- Choose appliances with controls that are easily reached in front or on the side.
- Place a phone and light within easy reach of the bed.

Tires easily

- Adjust kitchen and laundry work surfaces to lower levels so you can work while seated.
- Use a tub or shower seat.
- Install bathroom mirrors low enough to use while seated.

Limited mobility (use of wheelchairs, canes, walkers or crutches)

- Make sure door openings are at least 32 inches wide, 36 inches preferred.
- Do not use scatter rugs. But if you do, anchor them with foam mats.
- Floors and floor coverings should have no holes or tears.
- Interior doors should not have thresholds, tracks or other projections that can cause tripping.
- The entrance should be well-lighted with no steps, if possible.

To remain in our home as we age we may need to do some simple modifications and/or purchase some assistive devices. Or more complex modifications may be needed depending upon our physical needs. Planning and shopping can allow us to adapt our home environment to meet our changing physical needs. We can "age in place."

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