

All About Aging

by Grace Chen, M.D.

Making Homes Safer for Seniors

Falls are common among the elderly and broken hips from falls are a leading cause of death or significant functional decline in adults over age 65. As we age, health problems and the accompanying medications used to treat them tend to increase our fall risk. Making homes more fall-proof is critical to enabling older adults to continue living safely in their homes for as long as possible.

The first step is to evaluate the home for basic safety. There should be clear evacuation routes, along with escape plans for fire, earthquake or other emergencies. Smoke detectors should be installed outside every bedroom and on every floor. They should be tested regularly and their batteries replaced annually or even semi-annually. A fail-safe method is to change smoke-detector batteries when changing clocks to “spring forward” or “fall back.”

A carbon-monoxide detector also should be placed in a central location within the

home or apartment. Under California law, these devices are now required in both single-family homes and multi-unit dwellings. For added safety, the kitchen should have a fire extinguisher, and if the home has a fireplace, it should be equipped with protective screens.

Next, remove common hazards from the home, including clutter, throw rugs and raised doorway thresholds. Replace any frayed electrical cords and make sure no wiring or phone cords run underneath rugs or carpeting or across open areas. Repair loose carpeting and raised flooring.



Furniture and cords, of course, should be moved out of walking pathways. Put rubber tips on walkers or canes to avoid accidental slips. Water heaters should be set to temperatures below scalding (less than 120 degrees Fahrenheit) and appliances should be kept in proper working condition. Any weapons should be appropriately stored in safes or locked cabinets.

Following these simple steps will make your home safer for seniors and others alike.



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Finally, make changes to the home to make it safer for occupancy. Some basic recommendations include:

- Keep the home well lit, especially around stairways, porches and bathrooms.
- Use nightlights in hallways and bathrooms.
- Ensure light switches are easily accessible and do not require walking into a dark room to reach.
- Install light switches at both the top and bottom of stairs.
- Make sure stairways contain sturdy handrails.
- Install grab bars in the bathroom and place non-skid mats in and outside the shower/tub area.
- Use shower chairs or benches, if needed, and long-handled brushes to help with bathing.
- Peepholes should be low enough for all residents to view.
- Deadbolts should not require keys to open from inside, unless wandering is an issue.
- Doorways should be wide enough to allow a walker or wheelchair to pass through.
- Windows and screens should be easy to open and close.
- Sofas and chairs should be high and firm for easier sitting and rising.
- Thermostats should be both easy to read and operate.
- Telephones should be readily accessible from every room.
- Consider subscribing to an emergency-response system for 24-hour access to assistance, if needed.