

# Home Alone: How Older Adults Can Feel Safe

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## Introduction

Remaining safe in your home as you enter the later years of life involves keeping yourself as fit and healthy as possible, anticipating the declines that come with normal aging as well as the possibility of unexpected illness or disability, and acting in a smart manner to keep from becoming a crime victim.

## Give your home a safety check

The Federal Trade Commission, in cooperation with AARP, has prepared a safety checklist to help you identify problem areas in your home. Put a check next to the items that you know are in place in your home.



### *Throughout the house*

- Handrails are securely fastened on both sides of all stairways.
- All areas, including stairways, are well lit.
- Switches are easy to operate.
- Outside lights illuminate entrances and exits.
- A telephone is accessible at all times.
- Outside doors are protected by security locks that can be operated easily.
- Smoke detectors and carbon monoxide detectors are strategically located.
- Batteries are replaced regularly.
- Floors and stairs are free of cords and loose objects.

### *Bathroom*

- Safety equipment is installed properly. The basics are grab bars for the tub, shower, and near the commode.
- The tub and shower have nonslip surfaces.
- The hot water heater is set to prevent scalding.
- There are no tripping hazards such as cords or throw rugs.
- There is a night-light.

### *Bedroom*

- There is a sturdy bedside table with a nonslip lamp and space for eyeglasses.
- The furniture placement allows a clear path between the bathroom and bedroom.
- Rugs have nonslip backing.
- There is a comfortable chair with arms for rest or comfort when dressing.

### *Kitchen*

- Frequently used items can be reached without using a chair or stool.
- A fire extinguisher is within easy reach of the stove.
- There is a work area where a person can sit when preparing food.

## Plan ahead: Start making adaptations now

If you are planning some renovations, think ahead to the future. You might want to add a bathroom or another room to the lower level of your house so that, if need be, you could live on one floor. If you are remodeling a bathroom, consider adding grab rails to the bathtub or shower area. If you are knocking down walls and rearranging rooms, be sure that there are clear,

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## Plan ahead: Start making adaptations now *(continued)*

large pathways between living spaces in case someone needs to use a wheelchair or walker. Other small changes you should consider include enhancing light (both natural and artificial), widening doorways, closing in the backs of stairs, including or anchoring existing handrails, and replacing flooring with nonglare, slip-resistant material. In the kitchen, you may want to lower shelves and cupboards, include a lazy Susan, and replace kitchen taps with level-type or control-arm faucets. Finally, you might want to change locks and latches to ones that have an emergency release.

## Lifestyle changes now may increase your future safety

You can prevent injuries to yourself by keeping in good mental and physical health. For instance, inactivity can lead to some heart problems, less flexibility in the joints, and weaker muscles. Physical activity can also play an important part in preventing osteoporosis. Keeping your eyeglass prescription up-to-date and wearing a hearing aid if you need one will keep you safe from many unnecessary accidents. Social contacts with relatives, neighbors, and friends will make life more pleasurable, but they can also protect you from danger. Friends look out for one another and usually call if they suspect something is wrong. Finally, regular visits to your physician and mental health professional will assure you that your body and mind are in good working order to protect you from mistakes that lead to accidents.

## Don't be a victim of crime

People over the age of 50 are more likely to be a victim of crime than younger people. Often, the crime occurs in the person's home. Here are some tips.

- Find out who is behind the door before opening it. Ask any stranger to tell you his name and to show proof of identity.
- If you don't already have one, install a door with a small window or peephole.
- Make sure that locks, doors, and windows are strong and cannot be broken easily.
- Get a good alarm system.
- Ask your local police department to send someone over to check your house and give you advice on how to make it safer.
- Mark valuable property by engraving an identification number on it, such as your driver's license number.

- Make a list of expensive items such as jewelry or silver and take a photo of each item. Keep the list and photos in a safety deposit box or other safe place.
- Have your monthly pension and/or Social Security checks sent directly to your bank so that they will not be lying around in your mailbox or in your house.
- When on the street, stay alert at all times.
- Walk with a friend if possible and stay away from places where crimes are known to occur.
- Don't carry a lot of cash with you, but carry some so that if you are stopped by a robber you can hand over cash, rather than credit cards and other valuables.

According to a recent study by the AARP, people over age 50 are often victims of telemarketing fraud. To avoid such fraud, they recommend that you do the following:

- Register on the National Do Not Call Registry. Since Oct. 1, 2003, most telemarketers have not been allowed to call the telephone number of people who are registered. Register online (<http://www.donotcall.gov>) or call 1-888-382-1222.
- Remember to tell the caller not to call back if you don't want him to.
- Ask for written information about the product.
- Talk to a friend, relative, or financial adviser before responding.
- Hang up if you are asked to pay for a prize.
- Hang up if a telemarketer calls before 8 a.m. or after 9 p.m.
- Check out all companies with the state and local consumer protection office.
- Do not send money to anyone who insists on immediate payment.

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This educational program topic was reviewed by Mary Brintnall-Peterson, Program Specialist in Aging, University of Wisconsin-Extension; and Sally Howard, WVU Extension Agent, Braxton County.

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