

Home Alone: How Older Adults Can Feel Safe

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Introduction

This study topic is designed to help groups of older adults (55+) or individuals who are caring for an elderly friend or relative find ways to make their homes safer, as well as to prepare themselves for some of the safety issues that they might confront in their senior years. First, participants will examine the changes that occur to our bodies due to the normal aging process. These changes sometimes make it necessary to make adjustments to our home environment. Participants will be asked to think about how they might “elder-proof” their homes. Finally, older adults are often the victims of crime and consumer fraud. The last part of the lesson contains suggestions for protecting ourselves against such abuse.



Materials needed:

Paper, pencils, flipchart, and safety checklist

General facts about aging

We are all growing older, but each person’s experience with aging is different. Some of the declines we commonly associate with aging can be addressed with good planning and attention to our health and well-being. Here are some aging-related physical changes that may have an effect on our safety in and out of the home.

Activity:

Engage participants in a discussion of the normal aging process and how changes in physical and mental functioning might affect a person’s safety. For instance:

Vision

- Trouble adjusting from dark to light and vice versa
- Inability to see subtle contrasts in color
- Sensitivity to glare
- Decline in depth perception

Declines in vision may have an effect on the safety of older adults. Accidents may occur when an older person cannot distinguish one step from another on a staircase or when he or she slips on a shiny or wet floor. Sometimes elderly people have difficulty judging distances; when they try to put something on a high shelf, they may drop it and injure themselves.

Touch

- Loss of sensitivity to heat, pressure, and pain
- Inability to hold on and grip tightly

Older persons may not realize that the water coming from a faucet is hot enough to scald them until it is too late. They may get bed sores from lying in one place too long, but because they can’t feel them, sores are left unattended and become infected. An older person may fail to turn off an oven or water faucet because he or she can’t grip the handle.

Smell

- Decrease in the sense of smell
- Inability to distinguish different tastes

A decline in the sense of smell may cause older people to ignore spoiled food in their refrigerator and suffer from food poisoning after eating such food. In addition, older people may not immediately smell smoke when a fire is starting in their home.

Hearing

- Hearing loss

Older people may not hear a ringing telephone, a doorbell, or a smoke alarm when one of these signals is alerting them to danger. Hearing loss makes people more susceptible to crime because they are less likely than younger people to hear an intruder enter the home.

Balance and gait

- Balance problems caused by decline in hearing and vision
- Decrease in muscular strength
- Decrease in joint flexibility
- Decrease in bone strength
- Change in walking patterns – lift of the heels, length of stride

Older people are more likely than others to injure themselves by falling. When they do, they take a longer time to heal and sometimes suffer permanent disability.



Memory and cognition

- Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia are not a normal part of aging, but the number of incidences increases as people age. Many people, however, experience benign memory loss in their older years.
- Older people tend to learn more slowly.

Older people experience threats to their personal safety when they forget to lock the doors at night, turn off a burner on the stove, or take medication more than once a day. Sometimes older people are afraid to try new devices and techniques that might safeguard them because they think they are not "smart" enough to use them, when, in fact, they just need a longer time to absorb new information.

Make your home safe for older adults

Modifying and repairing the home can help prevent accidents and make most homes safer for older adults. Research suggests that one-third to one-half of home accidents can be prevented by such modification or repair.

Activity:

Activity should take from 10 to 20 minutes. Divide into groups of three or four individuals. Each group should imagine one room in a typical house and discuss safety issues for that room as well as ways to make the room safer for older adults. If you have a larger group, you could also include entryways, basements, attics, backyards, etc.

If you do not get enough responses from your groups, you may offer these practical suggestions.

Kitchen

- Keep frequently used dishes and pots and pans between waist and eye level to avoid reaching and bending.
- Lower the water temperatures.
- Use commercially available devices to help with gripping.
- Change cabinet hardware to large knobs or "D" grasp handles.
- Get rid of throw rugs and keep small items off the floor.
- Add additional lighting under cabinets and over cooking and preparation areas.
- Add lighted switches, which are helpful when one enters a dark room.
- List all prescriptions in large letters on the refrigerator door or near the phone.
- Make sure the telephone numbers of physicians and persons to contact in case of emergency are displayed prominently near the phone.
- Shelves should be removed from above the cooking area.

Bathroom

- Put nonslip strips or a rubber bath mat in the tub.
- Install well-secured grab bars to wall studs or anchor them to the tub.
- Use a bath bench or secure stool in the tub.
- Equip your bathroom with a chair or, if that's not possible, use a commode as a secure place to sit when drying off.
- Use a soap-on-a-rope that is secured to something reachable to avoid reaching and stooping.
- Store linens and towels and other items between waist and eye level.
- Add scald guards to fixtures to help prevent burning or scalding.
- Locate bathtub fixtures closer to the outside rim of the tub so a person does not have to lean over the tub to adjust the faucets.
- Install an 18-inch-high toilet, which will give a person greater leverage when rising to a standing position.
- Add hand-held shower attachments, which are good for individuals, such as arthritis sufferers, who have difficulty with mobility.

Bedroom

- Get rid of all scatter rugs.
- Raise a bed if it is too low and hard to get into.
- If a bed is too high, get an aerobic bench to step on to get in and out of bed safely.
- Arrange closets so that items used daily are between the waist and eye level.
- Keep the bedroom well lit and invest in night-lights for each room of the house.
- Use curtains to minimize echoes and sharp noises and to induce sleep.
- Use a “telephone notification device” that flashes each time the phone rings.

Living room

- Avoid overstuffed furniture because it is difficult to get into and out of.
- Raise the chairs and couch about 4 inches from the floor.
- Use chairs with arms so a person has something to push on.
- Low-pile, wall-to-wall carpeting is a safer surface for older people than wood, linoleum, or area rugs.
- Furniture should be stable and without sharp corners
- Furniture should be positioned in low-traffic areas.
- Keep extension cords in “out of the way” places. Do not put them under rugs.



Entryways, staircases, and hallways

- It is a good idea to have ample lighting outside, especially on porches, walkways, driveways, and garages. Sensor lights (lights that automatically go on when a motion is detected) are available at most hardware stores.
- Make sure smoke alarms are working and are positioned in key places through the home (e.g., in hallways directly outside of the bedroom). For hearing-impaired individuals, smoke detectors are available with strobe lights to signal the presence of smoke.
- Carbon monoxide detectors are important for homes with fossil fuel appliances such as natural-gas appliances, wood-burning stoves, or fuel-oil furnaces. Place one at the highest level in the home and one near the appliance itself.

A word about crime

Each year, about 2 million older people become crime victims. Older people are more likely than younger people to be attacked by strangers, be attacked at or near their homes, and be seriously hurt. Sometimes, family members or caregivers physically, mentally, or financially abuse older people.

The best thing to do at home is to lock doors and windows. Here are some other 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 including 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 AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons), people over age 50 are especially vulnerable to telemarketing fraud, accounting for about 56 percent of all such victims. To avoid telemarketing fraud, 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 (www.donotcall.gov) or call 1-888-382-1222.
- If a telemarketer does call, remember to tell the caller not to call back if you don't want him to.
- Ask for written information about the product.



A word about crime *(continued)*

- 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.

Home safety checklist

Activity:

Using the home safety checklist found in the participant sheet (WL 601, have participants rate their homes for safety. Suggest that they do a check every six months to see if they need to make additional adjustments.

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

Resources

AARP

1-800-424-3410
601 E. Street NW
Washington, DC 20049

<http://www.aarp.org/aboutaarp/>

AARP Home Security Information

<http://www.aarp.org/confacts/housing/homesecurity.html>

AARP Consumer Protection Information

www.aarp.org/consumerprotect

National Neighborhood Watch Program

“Burglary Prevention Checklist for Homes”

www.bayou.com/~captjim/sftychek.html

Council of Better Business Bureaus

(703) 525-0100

www.bbb.org

“Tips on Elderly Consumer Problems”

Do Not Call Registry

Federal Trade Commission

www.donotcall.gov

Farm Safety Association, Inc.

(519) 823-5600

www.farmsafety.ca

Information on safety for aging farmers

National Crime Prevention Council

www.ncpc.org/lsecldc.html

“Home Security Guide”

New York State: Office of Aging

www.agingwell.state.ny.us/safety/articles/tip/htm

North Carolina State Cooperative Extension

www.ces.ncsu.edu/almance/newsletters/Evelyn/aging/01/safetyremodels.html

West Virginia Bureau of Senior Services

304-558-3317

www.state.wv.us/senior_services

West Virginia University Center on Aging

LINK-AGE

1-888-982-4464

www.hsc.wvu.edu/coa/linkage

Information on services for older adults in West Virginia