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Are There Things I Can Do For My Aging Parents To Make Their Home Safer?

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A weekly question/answer column

Are There Things I Can Do For My Aging Parents To Make Their Home Safer?

Dorothy Woolley answers:*

Many of us are concerned about our aging parents. Fuzzy eyesight, diminished hearing, thinning bones, arthritis, poor balance, multiple medications and other problems associated with aging increase our parents' risk of an accident. Prevention is one of the best ways to help older people remain independent. Here are some suggestions to help make their home safer.

- **Stairs.** Stairs are particularly risky. Help them organize their living space so they seldom need to go up or down stairs. Make sure every stairway has good lighting and a sturdy handrail that reaches all the way to the top and bottom of the stairs.
- **Carpets and floors.** Check carpets for loose or frayed areas and tack down any loose edges. Get rid of slippery rugs. Make sure floors are even and level. Where possible, avoid carpets with thick pile. Put a stable nonslip rug in front of the kitchen and bathroom sinks and other places where water occasionally spills.
- **Clutter and obstacles.** Clean up clutter. Clear pathways of wastepaper baskets, electrical wires, magazine racks or other small objects. Look for places where your parent has to bend, reach or step over something. Remove anything that may get in the way or that may cause someone to trip or stumble.
- **Bathrooms.** Install grab bars in the bathroom, and install nonslip strips on the floor of the tub or shower. Consider buying a bench or chair for the shower so that your parent can easily rest if he or she becomes unsteady while showering. Use only sturdy nonslip rugs in the bathroom.
- **Phones.** Make sure there are telephones in the places where your parents spend the most time. Encourage them to get a cordless phone they can carry from room to room. Emergency pagers are available that allow them to summon help by pressing a button.
- **Lighting.** Check the lighting in rooms and hallways. Old eyes usually need more light, and good lighting can prevent accidents as your parents move about the house. Make sure there is a light by the bed, and it needs to be easy to turn on. Consider installing night lights in hallways, bathrooms and the kitchen.
- **Entrances.** Many falls occur when leaving or entering the home. Handrails, sturdy mats and nonslip surfaces are particularly important here. A chair on the porch is a good idea. When entering the home, residents are sometimes carrying bags. It is helpful if there is a place for them to put things down while they open the door.

Helping your parents make safety improvements in their home is important. Preventing accidents is one of the most effective ways to help older people.

* Dorothy Woolley is an M.S. student in Family and Human Development at Utah State University