

How to Age in Place

Steps to make a home safe, accessible, and comfortable for today and beyond

A whopping 90 percent of people aged 65 and older would prefer to stay in their own homes as they get older, rather than relocate to a senior living community, according to a recent study by the American Association of Retired Persons. This desire to age in place is also known to builders and architects as “universal design,” which means building, designing or remodeling a home so it’s more comfortable, convenient and safe for people of all generations.

“Often, we’ll see someone who has sustained an injury or had a stroke and all they want to do is return home to recover. Yet coming home can be tremendously challenging if they live on multiple levels or haven’t considered basics like access, lighting, and security. By thinking ahead, we can make our homes work for us into our older years,” says Bob Tucker, a senior care expert who also cared for his father for more than a decade after he was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease.

Start with an Assessment

“There are many creative ways to make a home more livable at all ages, which also makes the home more marketable in the long term,” says Leslie Stern, a Chicago-based licensed interior designer who specializes in universal design and meeting the needs of those with disabilities. “We look at everything from level changes to lighting and visibility to temperature,” she says. “People are surprised to learn that the bathroom is the most dangerous room in the house for seniors followed by the kitchen. And we need both of these rooms often throughout our day,” says Tucker.

As you’re starting to think of making a home friendlier for aging in place, there are many considerations, such as:

- Trip hazards– Identify loose carpeting, slick floors, uneven sidewalks or thresholds
- Lighting– Make stairways visible, ensure light switches are easily located at room entrances, and flashlights are available in all rooms
- Safety– Ensure that house numbers can be seen easily by emergency personnel, hot and cold water faucets are easily labeled, and fire extinguishers are readily available
- Stability– Install grab bars near tub, toilet and in the shower, ensuring a senior won’t mistakenly grab an unstable towel bar or paper holder
- Accessibility– Replace door knobs with levers, consider zero-entry doorways and showers, and main floor living

Even things like adding kitchen timers and whistling tea kettles are helpful home safety strategies to consider when creating a home for aging in place, says Tucker. Take a look at

the Home Modification Checklist in the Resources section under In-Home Care Tools to get you started.

Seek a Specialist

The National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) has identified “home modifications for aging-in-place” to be the fastest growing segment of the residential remodeling industry, and has even created a Certified Aging-in-Place Specialist (CAPS) designation program. CAPS certified builders are listed on the NAHB website at www.nahb.org.

“Certainly seek a designer or builder with a background in designing for a senior or disabled homeowner,” advises Stern. “Ask your contractor what percentage of their work evolves around designing for seniors or those with disabilities in order to find someone truly qualified to assess and meet your needs.”

Assistive Devices

In addition to home modifications, assistive devices can help seniors adapt their spaces for safety and accessibility, according to Tucker. “I’ve seen some very innovative and cool devices for toilets and showers that make a tremendous difference. Devices like a simple transfer chair that sits over the edge of a tub/shower entry, so you can seat yourself and then bring your feet over from a seated position. This adds so much safety, preventing you from balancing on one foot in a slippery shower situation,” he says.

There’s a lot of help out there in the form of adaptive devices for many Activities of Daily Living (ADLs), according to Tucker. “There are poles like a dancer pole, which can be installed near the bed to help people get themselves out of bed, silverware that’s weighted to give people with tremors more stability, and walkers with laser pointers to help guide people forward. I’ve seen devices that help people safely transfer to a vehicle or enter a pool – even a device to help someone use a golf club while seated in a golf cart,” he notes. “There are products out there for people with virtually any kind of challenge,” Tucker says. To find these items he suggests visiting your local pharmacy or seeking assistive medical devices online.

Paying for it all

“Paying for a more comfortable and secure space doesn’t have to cost a fortune,” says Stern. “Adding more lighting doesn’t have to be expensive. And perhaps you don’t need to replace a sofa, but just substitute a firmer or denser fill so it’s easier to get up from a seated position. Maybe someone in the family has a chair with arms that they’d swap you for your armless chair. Installing handles rather than knobs can be an easy fix as they fit into the same openings,” she says. “But investing some money into improvements makes a lot of sense if it

prevents you from a debilitating – and costly – accident, or if it allows you to remain in your home rather than paying for full-time senior living.”

“People are also surprised to learn that their insurance, Medicare, or long-term care plan may actually pay for some of the modifications,” shares Tucker who suggests that you look into your policies to see if help is available.

Making the difference

“Minor modifications to your home can make all the difference in your safety and well-being,” says Stern. “I recently worked with a couple who needed help making their home safe and comfortable for the husband who was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. His wife wanted to continue to live at home with her husband and didn’t want to move into a senior community that wouldn’t make sense for her. We were able to transform their main floor family room into a master suite and make the home a universal design so they could continue their life together.”

“Creating a space where you can be more independent and where you don’t have to call on someone for every need means more joy in living. If needed, there are so many things we can do to make life better at all ages,” she says.