

Tips for a Safe Home Environment

Many injuries happen at home. Eliminating hazardous conditions (such as clutter or poor lighting) and adding supportive features (grab bars or handrails, for example) in locations such as stairs and bathrooms are important strategies in fall prevention. When you identify home or environmental hazards as a potential cause of falls, you should immediately take steps to modify and eliminate them. As you do a walk-through of your home, consider some of these tips to help you create a fall-proof environment.

Entryways

Falls most often happen while getting in and out of your home. Be sure to check entryways, thresholds, and doors to identify slippery or uneven surfaces.

- Place reflective or contrasting, non-skid strips on stairs and steps leading into your home.
- Railings on both sides of stairs can provide support as you enter. Railings should extend beyond the first and last step.
- Installing a ramp or threshold ramp will help you avoid falls on steps or a doorway lip.



Interior Doorways

Doorways should be clear and wide enough for you to move through them without tripping or bumping into anything. Consider widening doorways by removing interior doors, installing “swing away” or “offset” hinges that allow doors to swing open outside the frame, rearranging furniture that might block pathways, and removing any clutter near the entrance.

For easy access, install lever door handle hardware. These allow you to open the door within minimal strength and dexterity. Traditional twist and turn handles can be difficult to grasp and may cause you to lose stability and balance.

In the Bathroom:

Do you need some support when you get in and out of the tub or up from the toilet?

Install grab bars on bathroom walls besides tubs, showers, and toilets. At least bars are recommended for the tub area. Evaluate the best placement and angle of grab bars for your space and needs.

Consider installing a raised toilet seat if you have difficulties getting on and off the toilet. Raised toilet seats or 3-in-1 commodes can make toilet transfers easier and safer.



Is the tub or shower floor slippery?

Apply non-skid appliqués or place a non-slip pad in the shower or tub to reduce your risk of a fall while bathing.

Are there loose rugs on the floor?

Avoid throw rugs in the bathroom, or tack them down securely with double sided tape.

Is the bathroom well lit?

Keep bathroom well lighted. Turn on a light at night or consider installing a night light or motion sensor light.

Does showering or other personal care make you tired?

Consider using a shower chair with a back and non-skid leg tips.

Avoid standing in the tub or shower if your balance, strength, or energy level is a problem.

Place a chair or bench in the bathroom to sit down on after bathing to complete the drying off process.

Additional safety tips in the bathroom:

- Lever faucet handles/controls and a handheld shower head can make bathing easier, providing better control and balance.
- Be careful of the water temperature if your legs or other parts of your body have a limited sense of feeling.

- Place soap in an old nylon that is tied to a grab bar or get soap-on-a-rope. This will prevent having to bend down to pick up dropped soap.

In the Bedroom

Is the path from your bed to the bathroom dark?

Turn on lights to avoid walking through dark areas. This will help you with your balance. Make sure you can easily reach a light switch when you enter a room.

Is there a light near the bed?

Make sure that the light by your bed is within easy reach or keep a flashlight handy. Use nightlights or motion sensor lights along the path from the bedroom to the bathroom and place and – especially important - place one in the bathroom.



Is there a clean path around your bed and other walkways?

Keep all rooms free from clutter, especially the floors. Furniture should be arranged to allow a clear path for walking, especially near all room exits and in hallways. Keep drawers and doors closed to avoid tripping over them.

Are there loose rugs on the floor?

Wall to wall, low pile carpets are safer than thick pile carpets or scatter rugs. If it is not possible to remove scatter rugs, they should have a non-skid backing (such as double face adhesive tape, rubberized backing, stay put netting). They should *never* be placed at the bottom or top of the stairs.

Do any dressers drawers or closet doors that open into the room?

Keep dresser drawers and closet doors closed to avoid run-ins.

Additional safety tips in the bedroom:

- Use stable chairs with armrests to make transfers easier.
- Consider raising the height of furniture or obtaining firmer cushions to make transfers easier. Furniture with armrests will also make transfers easier.
- Consider a baby monitor, walkie-talkie, or bell to allow you to call a family member or care partner anywhere in the house, especially at night.

- Keep a phone by your bed or carry a portable phone. Post emergency numbers at every telephone.

In the Kitchen

Are things you use often on high shelves?

Reaching, lifting, and carrying items are common in the kitchen.

Store frequently used items at a level that avoids stretching, bending, and lifting them over and over again. Consider keeping plates and utensils in drawers and heavy pots and appliances in lower cabinets or counters. Put lightweight or least-used objects on top shelves.

Is your stool unsteady?

If you must use a step tool, use one with stable, non-slip steps and a bar to hold on to—*don't* stand on a chair. Use a long-handled reacher to get lightweight items down from high shelves or pick things up from the floor.

Are your cabinets cluttered and difficult to get things in and out of?

Consider pullout shelves in under-counter storage areas so you can easily access pots, pans, bowls, etc. Add loop pull handles and/or knobs to cabinets and drawers if you don't already have them. These will help you open them easily.



Additional safety tips in the kitchen:

- If you have a hard time with vision, use contrasting color tape on the border of counter tops to avoid bumping into them.
- A cart can be handy for moving items about so that you don't have to carry them.
- Place chairs or tall stools near work surfaces to allow you to sit and rest while preparing food and to rest when you need to.
- Clean up spills (dry or wet) on hardwood or linoleum floors immediately. To avoid bending, use a reacher and a towel.
- Install good ceiling illumination and additional task lighting under cabinets or where food is prepared.

On Stairways

Are there handrails on the stairs?

Put sturdy handrails on both sides of steps and use them.

Are some steps broken or uneven?

Fix loose or uneven steps

Is there adequate lighting at the top and bottom of your stairway?

Make sure the lighting is adequate to optimize your balance and your vision. At least 60 watts is recommended.

Do you have light switches in both places?

Install lights and light switches at the bottom and top of the stairs.

Is the carpet on the steps loose or torn?

Periodically check the carpet on stairs to make sure it is secured and not worn. Make sure that carpets and runners are well-fastened.

Make sure you can easily detect where the edge of each step is. Place brightly colored tapes on the edge of the steps if needed. Consider adding treads or another skid resistant surface on non-carpeted steps to avoid slipping.



Additional safety tips for stairways:

- If vision is a problem, highlight the edge of the top or bottom steps with colored tape to help you judge your position. Pale, plain carpets may make the stairs easier to manage visually.
- Avoid being distracted when walking up/down stairs.
- Avoid carrying objects up/down stairs. If you need to transport something, move it from one step at a time as you proceed.

In Other Living Areas

Can you turn on a light without having to enter into a dark room?

Turn on lights to avoid walking through dark areas. This will help you with your balance.

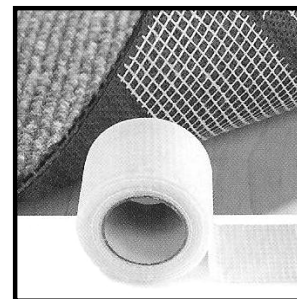
If glare is a problem for you, use shades or globes on light fixtures, frosted bulbs, indirect lighting, partially closed blinds, and curtains.

When you move through a room, do you have to walk around furniture?

Make sure that your furniture does not block or narrow pathways, making it more difficult to move about the room without tripping. Furniture should be arranged to allow a clear path for walking, especially near all exits and hallways. Remove small furniture pieces, like coffee tables, floor lamps, or large vases, because they can get in the way and increase your risk of falling. Rearrange your furniture to a layout that works for you, reducing the number of steps it takes to get to if from the entryway.

Do you have throw rugs on the floor?

Wall to wall, low-pile carpets are safer than thick pile carpets or scatter rugs. If it is not possible to remove scatter rugs, they should have a non-skid backing (e.g. double face adhesive tape, rubberized backing, stay put netting). Avoid placing them at the bottom or top of the stairs.



Are there papers, books, towels, shoes, magazines, boxes, blankets, or other objects on the floor or stairs?

Keep all rooms free from clutter, especially the floors along the main routes around the house and stairs.

Do you have to walk over or around wires or cords (like lamp, telephone, or extension cords)?

Keep electric cords and telephone wires near the walls and away from walking paths. Keep them covered or taped down to avoid being a tripping hazard.

Additional safety tips for living areas.

- If your chairs or sofas are low to the ground, consider pushing them against a wall for stability while getting up or replace them with taller furniture that has ample arm rests and leg support. Consider raising the

- height of furniture or using firmer cushions to make transfers easier. Furniture with armrests will also make transfers easier.
- Contrast in paint, furniture and carpet colors is helpful. Place reflective strips to identify uneven surfaces or steps.
- Post emergency numbers at every telephone. Carry a portable phone or cell phone with you, especially if you have fallen often.

Making Home Modifications

Staying safe in your home doesn't need to be expensive. However, once you begin making some of these simple changes to reduce your risk of falls you might become interested in exploring more significant modifications. In addition to keeping you safe in your home, modifications can make daily tasks and chores easier and help you live more independently.

Getting the Help You Need

A number of professionals can help you determine the modifications of greatest benefit to your current and future needs. **Occupational therapists** (OTs) assist people in developing the “skills for the job of living” necessary for independent and satisfying lives. **Physical therapists** (PTs) help with mobility, balance, flexibility, strength and conditioning, and help to identify and fit assistive devices that will aid mobility.

Occupational and physical therapists are specially trained to conduct home assessments. They will walk through your home with you and ask questions. They may even ask you to demonstrate certain tasks, such as getting in and out of the bathtub. They will recommend a range of solutions that are tailored to your specific needs and that consider the design of your house. You can and should be involved in determining appropriate home modification solutions that will work best for *you*.

To find the professionals you need most, contact the National MS Society at 1.800.344.4867. In addition to helping you find these healthcare professionals, they can recommend contractors and other community resources to help fund home modifications.

Conquering Clutter

Clutter is anything you don't need, want, or use that takes up time, energy or space. It can be old clothes, obsolete papers, toys, or disliked gifts. Objects may be strewn about or wedged into drawers; neatly stacked or stored. Clutter seems to have a life of its own, multiplying without any effort on your part! You may feel overwhelmed, controlled by your possessions, and/or doomed to be hopelessly disorganized. Perhaps most importantly, clutter can increase your risk of falling in the home.

A pile of shoes by the front door, wet towels on the floor of the bathroom, a stray newspaper or stack of books or magazines, a squeaky dog toy on the floor, or even a growing pile of mail on the counter, can be significant fall hazards. While you may be used to stepping over such items, clutter around your home is a risk and significantly impairs your ability to safely perform daily activities or enjoy leisure time in your space.

Tackling Clutter

Remember that clutter didn't accumulate overnight—don't try to take care of it in just one day! If the clutter seems like it's too much to tackle on your own, coordinate some help from family or friends. You can even hire a professional organizer to help.

- 1. Start with a plan.** You can take the room-by-room approach, or make a priority list and start with what poses the greatest risk to your wellbeing. Be sure to plan around your fatigue levels—if you experience fatigue in the afternoon, plan to work in the morning. You can work for short bursts of time—as little as 15 minutes a day will eventually get the job done.

For those items that you don't want or need, but that might be useful to others, you can:

- Donate them to charity
- Have a rummage or garage/yard sale
- Sell them on online
- Give them to friends and family

2. **Put clutter in its place!** Do the items scattered around your home have a place for them to go? Put them away where they belong. If they currently don't have place, make one. If you have items that you use often, make sure you store them in a place that is easily accessible. This will make them much easier to reach when you need them and put them away when you are done.
3. **Set up a system.** Once you have everything decluttered and organized, it will only stay that way temporarily. Think about how to manage the constant items coming into your home.
 - Where does the daily mail go?
 - How will you organize your bills?
 - Where will clothing and shoes go at the end of the day?
 - Is there a way to keep toiletries organized in the bathroom and keep towels off the floor?

Try to get everyone to use the storage systems you've set up, but—realistically—plan to do this again and schedule it on a regular basis (for example, every month). You actually save much more time dealing with clutter in the moment, rather than letting it grow to a much larger chore. Setting up a system that will organize your home should involve the whole family and work with your lifestyle for the long term. It should not only clear up clutter *now*, but also help to prevent it from coming back.

Out of Sight, Out of Mind?

Once the clutter is clear from the open spaces in your rooms and the staircase, you may want to consider organizing your cabinets, closets, and storage spaces. We often hastily shove things into different places and forget about them. It is very difficult to maintain a clutter-free home when closets are overfilled, drawers disorganized, garages filled with old items, and expired food taking up space in the refrigerator.

Go through all the rooms in your home and clean out expired/old items and things that you do not use or need from your cabinets, closets, and drawers. You can use the space you've made to store some of the stuff you want to keep.

You don't have to do everything at once, you can do just one room at a time, and schedule it throughout the year. Over time, be sure to organize each room every 1-2 years.