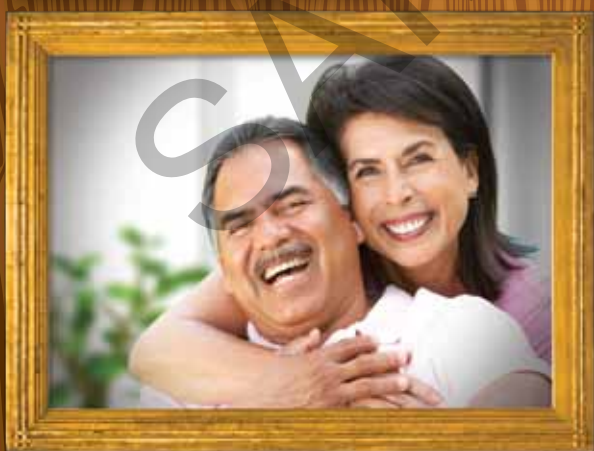


KEYS TO A HEALTHY *Home*



Healthy Homes **FOR OLDER ADULTS**

As Americans age, more and more of them are choosing to stay in their current homes instead of downsizing or moving to assisted-living facilities. If you're one of them, it makes sense to make sure your home is safe and healthy.

You can make your home healthy and avoid common risks to older adults by making your home smoke-free, fall-safe, and free of indoor air pollutants. Some of the tips in this book will help prevent injury and keep you prepared for dangerous conditions such as fires and heat waves. Others give you ideas on how to prevent unhealthy conditions that can trigger symptoms of chronic diseases, such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), heart disease, and asthma.

Follow these keys to a healthy home to stay safe and prevent unnecessary trips to the emergency room.



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#1 INDOOR AIR POLLUTION

Many older adults spend a lot of time indoors, so it's important to make sure the air inside your home is clean. Indoor air pollution can impact your health in a variety of ways. It can make you feel tired or lethargic, and it can aggravate symptoms of respiratory diseases such as asthma or COPD. Poor indoor air quality can even contribute to heart disease and stroke. Learning which pollutants might be in your home can help you protect your health.

Secondhand Smoke

Secondhand smoke contains hundreds of harmful chemicals, many of which are known to cause cancer, even in people who don't smoke themselves. Exposure to secondhand smoke can also trigger and worsen symptoms of heart disease and respiratory conditions such as COPD and asthma.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Don't allow smoking in your home

Opening the windows may reduce the odor of smoke, but it doesn't reduce the health risks of secondhand smoke. Letting people smoke in certain rooms or areas in your home does not eliminate the health risks to nonsmokers.

Don't allow smoking around children

Infants and children who are exposed to secondhand smoke are more likely to develop asthma and are at greater risk for other respiratory diseases such as pneumonia and bronchitis. They are also at greater risk of developing ear infections.



Dust and Allergies

Regular cleaning reduces dust and other irritants that can be bothersome to people with allergies and those who suffer from asthma.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Sweep your floors daily

Keep dust and allergens at bay by sweeping the floors in your home daily.

Vacuum your house weekly

Don't forget to vacuum your upholstery, a common place for dust mites.

Mop the kitchen floor weekly

You'll clean up dirt the broom didn't catch. Always use two buckets when you mop: one for clean water and one to wring dirty water into.

Wash sheets, blankets, and pillowcases weekly

Use hot water to kill dust mites.

Dust shelves, windowsills, and woodwork weekly

A dusting pole can help you reach ceiling fans and tall bookshelves.

Wash curtains once a month

Dust and dirt build up gradually, so wash curtains even if they don't look dirty.



Pets

You love your pet, but did you know dead skin cells from pets, called dander, attract dust mites and can trigger allergies and asthma attacks?

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Keep pets outside as much as possible
- Don't allow pets on the furniture
- Vacuum and dust twice a week

Carbon Monoxide

Carbon monoxide (CO) is produced when fuel is burned in a furnace or other heating systems. It should be vented to the outside to prevent CO poisoning, but if ducts are damaged or blocked, CO can build up in your home. CO poisoning is a dangerous situation and can be life threatening.

The symptoms of CO poisoning are similar to the flu and include severe headaches, dizziness, tiredness, nausea, and impaired judgment and coordination. If you feel better when you're away from your home or if symptoms get worse after turning on a fuel-burning device, you could be suffering from CO poisoning.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Install carbon monoxide detectors

Place them within 15 feet of every sleeping area. If an alarm sounds, leave the house immediately and call 911.

Check your furnace and heating units annually

See Chapter #4 for more information on furnace safety.

Never burn fuel indoors

The only exceptions are stoves and furnaces, and only with proper ventilation.

Be aware of the signs of CO poisoning

Don't ignore your symptoms. Seek help immediately, as further delay puts you at greater risk and can lead to loss of consciousness and even death.



Focus On: COPD

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is a common lung disease that makes breathing difficult. It's the fourth leading cause of death in the United States. Symptoms include:

- Cough with mucus
- Shortness of breath
- Fatigue
- Frequent respiratory infections

If you have COPD, exposure to indoor air pollution and allergens can make it worse. But there are some steps you can take to ease your symptoms.

- Avoid very cold air
- Don't allow smoking in your home
- Fix water leaks to prevent mold, dust mites, and cockroaches
- Eliminate fireplace smoke, and don't burn candles or incense
- Install carbon monoxide detectors to avoid CO poisoning



#2

HEAT STRESS

Summer heat waves are uncomfortable for everyone, but they can be especially dangerous for older adults. As you age, your body cannot control its temperature as well, making it hard to cool down. Existing health conditions such as chronic illness, mental impairment, and obesity could put you at greater risk.

Heat stroke is the most serious condition caused by high temperatures. During heat stroke, the body's temperature rises rapidly and severe damage to vital organs can occur.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Turn on the air conditioner

Even a few hours a day in cool air greatly reduces your risk of heat-related illness.

Visit air-conditioned buildings

If your home isn't air-conditioned, visit a senior center, movie theater, library, or shopping mall to cool off. Many towns establish official cooling centers that you can visit to help weather a heat wave.

Take a cool shower or bath

It's simple, but it works!

Drink lots of fluids

And not only when you're thirsty. Avoid drinking beverages with caffeine, alcohol, or lots of sugar because they cause dehydration, worsen symptoms of heat exhaustion, and can trigger symptoms of heat stroke.

Check your medications

Ask your doctor if your medications increase your chances of being affected by excessive heat.





#3 FALLS

Every 18 seconds an older adult falls and ends up in the hospital, often with a broken bone. The risk of falling increases with age for several reasons. As you age, your eyesight, hearing, and reflexes may not be as sharp as they used to be. Some health problems, such as diabetes, heart disease, or thyroid problems, can affect your balance. Also, some medications cause dizziness, which can lead to falls.

Avoiding falls doesn't mean you should stop being active. Getting exercise by going for walks and getting together with friends are important ways to stay healthy and happy. If you take care of your overall health and follow a few simple tips, you'll avoid most falls.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Stay fit

Regular exercise makes you stronger, more flexible, and slows the process of bone loss from osteoporosis.

Get your eyes and ears tested

You might not notice small changes in your sight or hearing, but they can put you at greater risk for falling.

Check the side effects of your medications

Tell your doctor if your medications are making you sleepy or dizzy. Sedatives and antidepressants can be especially dangerous.

Don't ignore chronic pain

People with severe pain are much more likely to fall. Talk to your doctor about causes of chronic pain, such as arthritis, and possible treatment options.

Wear rubber-soled shoes that support your feet

You'll be less likely to slip. Wearing only socks on smooth floors isn't safe.

Don't drink too much alcohol

Even a little bit affects your balance and reflexes.

Stand up slowly

If you get up too quickly, your blood pressure could drop, making you feel faint.

Get a home monitoring system

It can help in case of a fall or emergency. Look in the yellow pages under "medical alarm services."

How to Fall

If you feel yourself falling, don't panic. Try these tips to stay on your feet and avoid getting hurt.

- **Take a quick step or two**
- **Look for something or someone to grab onto**
- **Don't fall on your hip if possible**
- **Drop and roll out of the fall**

In 2007, the federal government passed the Safety of Seniors Act (SOS) to support anti-fall efforts throughout the country. Look for fall-prevention classes at your local university or community center. And talk to your doctor about how to avoid a fall.

Focus On: Canes

Canes can help you feel steady on uneven, unfamiliar, or icy paths. But the improper use of a cane or walker can be dangerous. Have a physical therapist fit you with a cane and show you how to use it. Never use someone else's cane or walker.



Make Your Home a “No Fall Zone”

At least one-third of all falls involving older adults are a result of hazards in the home. The most common cause is tripping over objects on the floor. Other causes include poor lighting, loose rugs, poorly mounted grab bars, and unsteady furniture.

It's a good idea to walk through your home and look for problems that could lead to a fall. An occupational therapist can also help recommend some changes.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- **Keep your home well lit, especially at the top and bottom of stairs**
- **Hold handrails when going up and down stairs**
- **Use nonskid mats under your rugs**
- **Take care when you're carrying something that blocks your view**
- **Make sure steps are even in height**
- **Put a nonslip floor or mat in the tub**
- **Install a grab bar in the tub and near the toilet**
- **Use a change in color to identify changes in floor levels or surface types**
- **Use contrasting color strips to identify first and last steps**
- **Don't leave anything on the floor; you could trip on it later**
- **Don't stand on a chair or table to reach something that's too high**



#4

FIRE

Older adults are especially vulnerable to home fires because many live alone and can't respond quickly. With a few time-tested tips, such as installing smoke detectors and using appliances wisely, you can prevent most fires. The best way to stay safe is to prevent a fire from happening in the first place.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Install smoke detectors on every floor of your home

They're inexpensive and can double your chances of survival. Test batteries monthly.

Plan your escape

Know the best way to escape from every room in the house. Get out first and then call for help.

Set a timer when you cook

You won't forget if the stove or oven is on.

Keep anything that can catch fire away from the stovetop

This includes potholders, oven mitts, paper or plastic bags, towels, and curtains.

Keep a fire extinguisher in the house

Use it on small fires that involve a single object, such as a wastebasket.

Don't smoke in bed

Smoking is unhealthy, but if you must smoke, go outside. NEVER smoke in a home where oxygen is used.

Check electrical cords

Don't overload outlets by plugging in too many cords, and don't put cords under rugs or in high-traffic areas.



Focus On: Stop, Drop, and Roll

If your clothes catch on fire, drop to the ground and cover your face with your hands. Roll back and forth to put out the fire. Treat burns immediately with cold water, and then call for help.

Safe Heating

When temperatures drop in the winter, the number of home fires rises. Many of these fires are caused by heating equipment because furnaces and space heaters are in use for longer periods of time.

Many winter fires can be prevented. Follow these safe heating tips to keep your home safe.

FURNACES

Have your furnace inspected by a professional prior to every heating season. You shouldn't attempt repairs on your own, but you can look for potential dangers.

Keep the area around your furnace clear

The furnace needs air to work properly, and nearby trash or clutter could catch fire.

Check nearby walls and the ceiling

If a wall is hot or discolored, you may need more clearance around your furnace.

Check the chimney

It shouldn't have any cracks or loose bricks.

SPACE HEATERS

Every year, more than 300 people die in fires caused by space heaters, and 6,000 people go to the emergency room for treatment of burns from space heaters.

Only use space heaters in open areas

Air needs to circulate around the space heater for it to work properly.

Keep space heaters at least three feet away from flammable items

Any closer is a big fire danger!

Don't add fuel when the heater is operating or hot

Always refuel outside, and store kerosene outside your home in a well-ventilated area.

FIREPLACES AND WOOD STOVES

Because of rising heating costs, many people choose to heat their homes with fireplaces or wood stoves. They're perfectly safe options when used properly.

Have your chimney inspected annually

If necessary, have it cleaned as well.

Clear the area around the stove or fireplace

Get rid of debris, decorations, and anything flammable.

Don't restrict airflow

Keep air inlets open, otherwise creosote buildup could cause a chimney fire.





#5 HOUSEHOLD PESTS

Insects and rodents in your home can trigger allergies and spread disease. Pests seek out food and hiding places, so the most important step you can take is to keep your home clean and clutter-free. But if your paths do cross, here are some ways to take care of rodent and insect invaders.

Rodents

Mice and rats can carry diseases, such as rat bite fever—a bacterial infection caused by mouse and rat bites—and hantavirus, which is spread through mouse and rat waste and can be inhaled by humans.

Look for these signs of rodents in your house:

- Gnawed wood or electrical cords
- Droppings
- Nests
- Scampering noises

The best way to keep rodents out is to keep a clean and clutter-free house. In addition, try these steps:

- Seal exterior gaps with mortar
- Install weather-stripping at the bottom of basement and garage doors
- Eliminate all water and food sources around the house, including bird feeders and pet dishes
- Keep all food (pet and human) in airtight plastic, glass, or steel containers
- Get a house cat—a cat can help with mice but not rats



Insects

The most common insects you'll encounter in your home are dust mites, cockroaches, fleas, and ticks.

Dust mites are too small to see without a microscope. They eat skin cells shed by people, and they thrive in warm, humid environments. Many people suffer from dust mite allergies, which are similar to hay fever.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

In most homes, bedding, upholstered furniture, and carpeting provide an ideal environment for dust mites. Clean and dust these areas regularly.

Cockroaches are unseemly and their droppings can be harmful to people with asthma.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Eliminate their food source, and cockroaches will go away. Clean up food spills immediately and put away all food. When using bait traps, put them in corners and against walls, where cockroaches are likely to travel.

Fleas and ticks are carried into the house by pets and on clothing.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Control fleas by washing bedding often, shampooing pets, vacuuming floors, and using flea combs and traps.

Focus On: Pesticides

Chemical pesticides can help control insect and rodent problems when used properly, but they can also be harmful to people. Children are especially at risk because they may not know the dangers of bug sprays, flea collars, rat poison, and other pesticides.

Here are some tips to stay safe around pesticides:

- **Always read the instructions**
- **Be extra careful when using airborne pesticides such as sprays and flea bombs**
- **Keep pesticides stored out of reach of children, and don't put traps or poisons where kids might find them**
- **Always wash your hands after handling hazardous products**
- **If you cannot handle an infestation on your own, call an exterminator**





#6 UV RADIATION

Part of a healthy lifestyle is getting outside and staying active. But UV radiation from the sun and from tanning beds can be harmful to your eyes and skin, so it's important to take precautions when you're outside.

Too much sun can also cause your skin to wrinkle, develop dark spots, and become leathery. You may think these changes are a natural part of aging, but many are actually caused by UV radiation.

Your Eyes

Cataracts are a clouding of the eye's lens. If you have blurred or cloudy vision, colors appear faded, or you have poor night vision and double vision, you could have cataracts. Older adults are at greater risk of cataracts, which are a major cause of blindness.

Age-related macular degeneration (AMD) is a disease associated with aging that makes it hard to see fine details and recognize faces. Overexposure to UV rays may contribute to the onset of AMD.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Protect your eyes with sunglasses that block UV rays. Wraparound sunglasses are best because they block rays from coming in from the side.

Your Skin

Skin cancer is the most common form of cancer in the United States. If you have a family history of skin cancer, or if you've had a severe sunburn, you're more likely to develop the disease.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Limit your sun exposure

Cover as much skin as possible with a hat and long sleeves.

Use sunscreen

Make sure it's SPF 15 or higher. Apply to any exposed skin.

Don't use tanning booths

They use the same UV radiation as the sun.

Check your entire body for moles once a month

If any moles have irregular shapes, vary in color, or are bigger than a pencil eraser, tell your doctor. Skin cancer is very treatable if caught early.



#7 WATER QUALITY

Most people get their water from a public utility that purifies it before it reaches their homes. Still, your drinking water can become contaminated with potentially harmful substances, such as bacteria, viruses, and lead.

Contact with contaminants can lead to serious health problems, especially in older persons with chronic health conditions. But knowing the risks and taking steps to protect yourself can keep your home safe.

Bacteria and Viruses

Microbes are tiny organisms that are too small to see without a microscope. Most microbes in drinking water are not harmful. But occasionally, bacteria or viruses can cause upset stomach, diarrhea, or more serious illness. Older adults are more likely to get sick because their immune systems are often weaker.

Lead

Long-term exposure to lead can be harmful to your nervous system. Recent studies have linked elevated lead levels in bones to increased heart disease. Lead can enter your drinking water through lead pipes in older homes, especially those built before 1986.

Pesticides, Gas, and Oil

These contaminants can seep into the ground and get into drinking water, causing damage to the kidneys, liver, or other organs. This is a particular concern in rural areas and in homes that use well water.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Learn about your water

If you think your plumbing contains lead, request an annual water quality report from your utility.

Run the cold water for three minutes

Flush out potential built-up lead whenever you haven't used the water for several hours.

Be aware of advisories

Occasionally your local health department will issue an advisory about your drinking water. It might recommend boiling your water to kill microbes.

Test your well water annually

If you get your water from a private well, it's not subject to EPA standards. Have your water tested by a professional every year.

RESOURCES

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Healthy Homes
www.cdc.gov/healthyhomes

National Center for Healthy Housing
www.nchh.org

U.S. Consumer Products Safety Commission: Carbon Monoxide
www.cpsc.gov/cpsc/pub/pubs/466.html

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development: Making Homes Healthier for Families
www.hud.gov/offices/lead/healthyhomes/index.cfm

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency: Aging Initiative
www.epa.gov/aging/resources/factsheets/index.htm

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency: Design for the Environment
www.epa.gov/dfe/index.htm

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency: Indoor Air Quality
www.epa.gov/iaq/index.html

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