

Equipping a Home for an Aging Parent

White Paper

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As a person ages, it often becomes more difficult for them to maneuver through their home. The culprit may be stairs, excessive clutter, an outdated bathroom, or kitchen, et al. However, there are basic home improvements that can enhance the quality of an elderly person's life and allow them to live independently in their home for as long as possible.

In this guide, we'll first look at how to determine if home care is needed for your loved one. From there, we'll go over a list of simple home modifications, many of which you can do yourself (a few might require hiring a contractor, though). Finally, we'll look at ways to address your loved one's increasing home care needs (e.g., hiring a home health care professional) and discuss current and future trends for modifying or building adequate housing for seniors.

I. When is Home Care Needed?

Watching an elderly family member—be it your mother, father or aunt—slowly lose independence as they age is a scenario that millions of family caregivers live with each and every day. Whether this dependence is due to increased frailty or the progression of a chronic condition such as Alzheimer's, the family of an elderly person should be diligent to make sure their loved one is receiving the proper care. With this in mind, this section will help you determine what type of care may be needed, from professional home care to a skilled nursing facility. Below are some basic assessments¹, which can be carried out by the family caregiver or a professional senior care agency.

Activities of Daily Living (ADL)

This assessment gathers information on your elder's ability to manage ADLs, such as personal care and housework. It also answers questions about physical limitations and memory problems:

- Is your loved one able to do housework, laundry, shopping, and cooking?
- How well does your loved one maintain personal care (bathing, dressing, using the toilet, etc.)?
- Does your loved one manage medical appointments and medications?
- Is your loved one able to handle personal finances and legal issues?

(Continued on next page.)

¹<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/caringforyourparents/caregiver/homecare/whenis.html>

Physical Health Considerations

Consult with your loved one's primary care physician or a geriatric specialist to evaluate his or his physical capacities. Things to consider:

- Mobility—Can your elderly father safely maneuver around his home or neighborhood?
- Vision—Many elders do not report their vision problems to health care providers, even though trouble with seeing commonly leads to a reduction in social interaction, depression, and injuries from falls.
- Hearing—Like poor vision, hearing deficits can also affect one's quality of life. Many people are surprised to find out just how advanced modern hearing aid technology is, so be sure to report any problems with your loved one's hearing problems to a specialist.

Other assessment areas include mental health considerations, nutrition considerations, and putting all of the information together to create a clear picture of the capabilities of the elderly person. Answering these questions with a home care agency will make the conversation more useful and productive. And, most importantly, it will lead to the best elderly care possible for your loved one.

II. Home Improvements

Once your loved one's home care needs are addressed, it's time to start making home modifications to meet their needs. Whether it's clearing out clutter, installing grab bars, or fall-proofing the bathroom, there are many basic home improvements that can enhance the quality of an elderly person's life, and allow them to live independently in their home for as long as possible. Below are some tips and ideas for keeping your loved one safe and comfortable in their own home.

- Lever door handles and faucet handles that operate easily with a push
- Adjustable closet rods
- A night light in bedroom
- No scatter rugs
- Handrails on both sides of staircases and outside steps
- Brighter staircase lighting
- Large rocker light switches that turn on/off with a push
- Electric outlets 27 inches above floor
- Peephole or view panel in front door
- Walk-in shower with grab bars and portable or adjustable shower seat
- Handheld adjustable shower head

- Non-skid surface for bath tub and shower floor
- Grab bars by the toilet and tub
- Tilting or full-length mirror in bathroom
- Bathroom telephone that is reachable in case of a fall
- Adjustable countertops or lower counter for work space in kitchen
- Rounded kitchen counter tops
- Sliding shelves in cupboards, lazy Susan in corner cabinet
- First floor bedroom and bath allow living entirely on one level if necessary



Image via Flickr/Creative Commons

General home safety tips for seniors

Besides some easy-to-install home modifications, there are other ways that you can ensure your loved one's independence in the midst of receiving long-term care. Below are things your elderly parent should consider and/or be aware of.

- Consider a medical alert or a buddy system
- Keep a fire extinguisher and smoke detector on every floor
- Use extreme caution when smoking
- Always get up slowly after sitting or lying down
- Wear proper fitting shoes with low heels
- Use a correctly measured walking aid
- Remove scatter rugs and tack down all others
- Remove electrical or telephone cords from high traffic areas
- Avoid using slippery wax on floors
- Wipe up spills promptly
- Avoid standing on ladders or chairs
- Have sturdy rails for all stairs inside and outside the house
- Use only non-glare 100 watt bulbs (or greater wattage)
- Make sure that all staircases have good lighting with switches at top and bottom
- Staircase steps should have a non-slip surface

III. Plan Ahead With Universal Design

There have been murmurs in the elder care community lately about the benefits of Universal Design. Basically, this means that when choosing a new home or renovating your current house, keep in mind the usability of the space for people of all ages—after all, multigenerational homes are becoming more and more common in the U.S.

So what exactly is Universal Design? AARP describes it as such²:

Universal Design is about creating an attractive, stylish space that everyone, regardless of age, size, or ability, can live in or visit. A home with Universal Design makes it easier for residents to live in, and for guests to visit now and in the future, even as everybody's needs and abilities change.

Universal Design—commonly referred to as UD—goes beyond just the home. It can also enable and empower a diverse population through universally accessible transportation, streets, buildings, et al. Perhaps most encouraging is the fact that UD pairs chic design with accessibility, so you won't have to live in a house with a bathroom reminiscent of something found in a sanitarium. While most people can't afford a complete renovation of their homes, there are some low-cost fixes that can be easily done, including creating a no-step entry, a single-floor living space, and installing easy-to-use handles and switches.



Image via Flickr/Creative Commons

AARP blogger Patti Shea, a 41-year-old full time caregiver of her aging parents, shares some insight on why incorporating UD into your home is a good idea:

- **Think of the future you**—While you may be healthy now, it might not always be that way. Do yourself a favor and audit your house today, making note of what needs to be changed now and on into the future.
- **Think of your family**—Many UD amenities that are benefit for seniors are ideal for small children, too. For example, wider hallways that can fit a walker or a wheelchair can also fit a stroller.
- **Think safety**—Fall proofing a home will help ensure an elderly person's safety. Likewise with proper lighting and building a ramp into your home. With UD, safety is always the underling factor.

²http://www.aarp.org/home-garden/home-improvement/info-09-2009/what_is_universal_design.html

IV. Keeping an Elderly Parent Independent

With the number of Americans 65 and older expected to double over the next 30 years, more and more seniors and their families will go through a tough decision-making process to ensure the best possible route for addressing elderly care. This challenge becomes more difficult if no one takes the time to think through various care options *before* severe illness or injury occurs, making it impossible for elders to continue to live independently.

There are, however, plenty of options for help, many of which adjust to the schedules and budgets of each particular family. Whether it's a nonprofit volunteer service or a professional care firm, there are many areas where help can be provided, such as³:

- Assistance with dealing with paperwork and technology
- Trustworthy referrals to service workers, home health care agencies and personnel
- Information about and transport to local classes and social activities at a discounted rate
- Regular visiting
- Prepared meals delivered to the home
- Shopping services
- Adult day care

The future of senior living?

Former secretary of the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, Henry Cisneros, writes in the book *Independent for Life: Homes and Neighborhoods for an Aging America* that another way to prolong elderly independence is to change American neighborhoods and communities so that elderly persons can remain in them longer. Many traditional American homes and neighborhoods were designed for yesterday's demographic realities. However, homes can be retrofitted, new age-appropriate homes can be built, and existing neighborhoods can be reconnected to a larger community.

Cisneros notes that community changes can come in the form of affordable small-scale housing, as well as cluster housing situated in walkable communities with easy access to health facilities, public transportation, etc. Elderly living of the future can even borrow from the design of current assisted living facilities and, perhaps, be built near or

attached to family homes.

³http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/24/staying-independent-in-old-age-with-a-little-help/?_r=1

V. Conclusion

It's encouraging to know that the future of senior housing looks to proactively address the present-day shortcomings of many of the houses and apartments built in the last 100 years. Even so, it's relatively easy to modify an existing home to allow maximum mobility for an elderly loved one. Add in the ready availability of professional home care, and your loved one can expect to live independently in their own home for as long as possible.