

around the HOUSE

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How Safe Is Your Home? (Part I)

I initially started this month's article with the intent of discussing what type of professional to consult to help your home become a truly independent living life span home.

The idea is to remain at home safely and “age in place” with com-



Paying attention to little things such as throw rugs can keep your home safer.

plete in-home independence. If you can successfully do this you'll save thousands of dollars and hopefully reduce the burden on Medicare and Medicaid.

I soon realized it would first be best to help prevent accidents and the possible need for mobility devices by making your home safer. The aim is to guide you in taking an inventory of your home and discuss things you can do. As the everyday user, you are the first and best in-house expert.

Safety Reasons

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Department on Aging reports falls are the leading cause of

death from injury among people 65 or older. Elderly individuals account for 75% of deaths from falls. Two-thirds of those who fall will fall again within six months. Among people 65–69, one out of every 200 falls results in a hip fracture, and among those 85 and over, one fall in ten results in a hip fracture.

Those are already startling statistics, but further research clarifies why action is needed to provide increased home safety.

“The most profound effect of falling is the loss of independent functioning,” reports the fact sheet

Many of the items that make a home safer for ambulatory people will also greatly assist those who use a wheelchair or other mobility device.

Preventing Falls in the Elderly by K.R. Tremblay Jr. and C.E. Barber at the Colorado State University Extension. “Twenty-five percent of those who fracture a hip require long-term nursing care. About 50% of the elderly who sustain a fall-related injury will be



Checking sidewalks for small cracks can help make it easier for wheelchair users to navigate outside the home.

discharged to a nursing home rather than return home.”

The majority of *PN* readers may use mobility devices and assistive technology. What is interesting to note is that many of the items that make a home safer for ambulatory people will also greatly assist those who use a wheelchair or other mobility device. These items may also assist mature friends, aging parents, and grandparents.

Begin Outside

Spring is a good time to get outside and begin a fresh housecleaning.

Take a look at your driveway and sidewalks. Repair any abrupt edges. Remember that more than a half-inch rise at a door threshold is a wheelchair hindrance; that goes for outside surfaces as well. A wheelchair obstacle is probably also a tripping hazard. Trim the shrubbery along the pathway to your home. Keep walk areas clear of clutter, rocks, and tools. Is there a patch of water across a walkway that becomes “black ice” at times? Mitigate water issues at all circulation areas. Do downspouts cut across sidewalks?

Install adequate lighting if needed by doorways and along walkways leading to doors or even to the backyard garbage and recycling containers.

If you are in a freeze-thaw climate area, there may be slab settlement outside adjacent to the garage door. Con-

sider a mini concrete ramp patch and denote the edge of the garage with bright yellow exterior adhesive tape or caution paint. Better yet, jack the slab up to return it to its flush location. We have personally experienced a family fall at this location.

Install handrails at stairs and steps. Have the steps settled outside



Contrasting bright paint alerts wheelchair users to changes in height.



A strip of bright yellow paint or tape marks the edge of a garage.

the front door or rear garage door? Check the door threshold height. If you're a wheelchair user you are well aware that more than a half inch is too much. If it must remain as is, identify it with contrasting bright paint to define the surface edge.

Are you able to easily identify visitors, hear the doorbell, and reach the mailbox? It may be a good idea to have a communication device like a flashing light at the front door that can be remote activated if a person falls. A phone near the front door is also a good idea.

The Garage

How about the garage? This is an area that is traditionally full of clutter. The same rules apply as to the exterior of your home.

Is your parking space always available and closest to the entry door? Is there adequate space between the car and the adjacent car

or other surfaces, whatever they are? I try to design garages for wheelchair users with at least a five-foot circulation space between cars. This works well for walker, scooter, and other mobility device users.

You probably have an automatic door opener, but if not, it's time for an upgrade. Get one with a light that goes on when operating and has a battery backup. This is the type of unit that will cover you in a power outage.

The Little Things

Use common sense and pay attention to the little things at home that aggravate you and are "in the way." Pick up all the throw rugs you slip and trip over.

What about your interior stairs? You know intuitively what and where these hazards are; just break out of your comfort zone and make some simple changes that certainly won't break your back. It's not at all funny to say they just might if you don't tend to them.

For more information on home features, visit universaldesignonline.com or contact the writer at CharlesSchwab@UniversalDesignOnline.com. ■

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