

# At Home for Life

## Physical Challenges of Aging

### I. Vision

Changes accelerate after age 50 and increase in severity after age 65. Discerning closely related colors, especially in the blue/green spectrum, may be difficult. It takes longer to focus when moving from dark to light and vice versa.

#### **Tips to compensate for poor vision**

Clearly mark hazardous changes in floor levels.

Position furniture away from areas where you often walk (near doorways, clearance around bed)

Adjust illumination throughout your home using higher wattage bulbs where appropriate. Use directed lighting from behind the shoulder and distribute light evenly to avoid shiny surfaces and help eliminate glare.

Add additional light for specific tasks (i.e. close work like reading, knitting, and crossword puzzles).

#### **Get organized**

Keep things in the same place to make them easier to find (keys hanging on hook by the door, bulletin board for business cards, calendar with appointments filled in and upcoming events).

Make an effort to put things away where they belong so they will be there when you need them. Plastic clear tubs are great for keeping items together.

#### **Be aware of color scheme**

Yellow, oranges and reds are easier to distinguish.

Avoid closely related colors together. Use contrasting colors between places such as doorways and walls, dishes and tablecloth, edges of steps.

#### **Label items**

Mark positions on your stove, microwave, washing machine, thermostat, bottles or anything else where the operating controls are hard to determine. Use:

Thick sharpie pens, nail polish, raised puffy paint

Sticky back hook Velcro (the bumpy type)

A "Hi Marks" pen from Lighthouse.org

Place a rubber band around bottles to discern from others (shampoo vs. cream rinse, salt vs. pepper) Plastic raised stick-on dots

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## **II. Hearing Loss**

The most common disability among older persons. Hearing in the higher frequency ranges decline gradually. Background noises interfere with your ability to hear normal conversations.

### **Hearing loss tips**

Go to an audiologist for a baseline exam and consider a hearing aid if appropriate. Teletypewriters or text telephone for the deaf - (TTY's) allow people to type out messages.

Audible warnings can be accompanied by visual or vibrating devices (flashing lights for doorbells,

vibrating alarm clock placed under the pillow).

Position hearing impaired person in the quietest corner of the room away from crowds. Use lined or insulated drapes, carpet and other sound absorbing materials.

Closed captioning for TV

## **III. Dexterity Limiting Conditions**

For people with arthritis or other dexterity limiting conditions, operating controls and switches, gripping objects such as door knobs and using tools and utensils are the primary problem areas.

### **Dexterity enhancing tips**

Consider installing single lever faucets in sinks and lever style doorknob.

Build up handles on utensils.

Use rubber grippers to open bottles.

D shaped cabinet handles in kitchen are easier to grasp.

Rocker light switches can be used with one finger.

## **IV. Balance and Mobility**

Falls occur in over one third of persons over 65 and in over half of persons over 75. A third of the older population reports some difficulty with balance or ambulation.

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## Qualities of a Livable Home

### I. Entrance and Exits

Front door 36 inches wide with maximum ½ inch high threshold, flat if possible

Steps in good repair

Secure railings on both sides that go past the top and bottom step.

Door knobs and locks – lever door knobs are the easiest to use

Peek window on side of door for better security – You can then see visitors before letting them in

Lighting - well lit entryway with illuminated high visibility address numbers

Clutter - clear it away for safer passage

Doormats should be safe with non-slip bottoms

**Big, easy to spot house numbers**

### II. General Living Areas

Walking pathways uncluttered

Windows/doors open easily

Light switches-ideally rocker-type, illuminated, mounted 42 inches up from floor

Electrical/phone cords secured – should not be run under carpet or area rugs

Outlets should be 18-24 inches up from floor

Furniture - firm seating preferably with arms, risers under the feet to lift as needed

Phone – Large push buttons, programmed speed dial emergency contacts, portable phone/cell

Non-slip easily maintained flooring, low pile carpeting; avoid small throw rugs, all rugs need rubber backing

### III. Kitchen

Single lever faucets to ease use

Refrigerator and freezer doors easily accessed - French doors with bottom freezer vs. side by side which is easier for wheelchair accessibility

Height of cabinets – 15 inches high from the counter instead of 18 inch standard; consider pull down cabinets or re-organizing contents for easier access

Adequate workspace with counters averaging 36 inches high; may vary depending on user's height

Stove door easily reached - knobs for burners in the front or on the side should be well-marked

Transporting food using a rolling cart, a walker with tray or Rollator walker

Pull out drawer or counter space under microwave oven-landing pad for hot items

### IV. Bedroom

Is the doorway wheelchair/walker accessible (32-36 inches wide)?” If not, remove door stop, install swing clear hinges, remove door, or consider a pocket door if possible.

Can one get in and out of bed easily? Bed mattress should not exceed 22 inches from floor for easiest entry and exit. Clearance on sides of bed 36 inches with 60 inches clear on closet side.

Is there a light and phone easily reachable from the bed?

Can clothing be easily reached in the closet? Use height adjustable poles and shelving.

Is there a clear path to the bathroom?

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## **V. Bathroom**

Is the doorway wheelchair/walker accessible (32-36 inches wide)? (See Bedroom Tips)

Grab bars - well positioned

Bathmats – large with good rubber backing-do **The Shrager Twist test**

Shower seats - transfer bench for high walled tub, chair for shower

Toilet height - optimal height 15-19 inches high; raised seats available with or without handles

Sinks - 27-30 inches underneath clearance to accommodate a chair

Single lever faucet for visual indicator and ease to manipulate

## **VI. Stairs**

Stairs are second only to bathrooms in frequency of incidents of accidents

### **Treads and risers**

Inside risers should not be more than 6-7 inches

Outside risers should have a minimum height of 4 inches and maximum height of 7 inches

Tread should be wide enough so that your foot can rest completely on it (11 inches deep)

Open risers (in the back) can be a tripping hazard

### **Handrails**

Install on both sides

Should extend beyond top and bottom of steps

If the stairway is too wide consider a bannister down the middle

Mount 1.5 inches from the wall to allow adequate grasping space

### **Lighting**

Needs to be uniformly shining on steps and the top and bottom landings

Should not create a glare

## **VII. Doorways**

Should be minimum of 32 inches wide to accommodate a standard wheelchair (24-27 inches)

Needs to be 36 inches wide if a wheelchair requires turning into the doorway from the hall

Option to expand doorway by using expandable offset hinges that adds about 2 inches of width

Remove door stop behind door

Remove door completely and put up curtain