

# Home Improvements and Modifications for Aging in Place

*August 20, 2020 by Julia Weaver*

Now more than ever before, we're seeing more adults choosing to live at home as they grow in years, or what is known as aging in place, and maintain their lifestyle for as long as possible, rather than moving into a nursing home or assisted care center. In fact, three-quarters of adults 50 years and older would prefer to remain in their homes as they age, according to a survey by AARP. Though many of us won't be able to live independently forever, home modifications will allow you or your loved ones to continue to live in their home longer by creating a more manageable environment. Whether they're living in a single-story condo in Dallas, TX or a three-story home in Portland, OR, there are modifications that can be made to every home to help make daily tasks a little easier.



# Helpful home modifications

As we grow older our bodies and capabilities change, and not all homes are designed to support this challenge we'll face. A lot of times doorways are too narrow, bathrooms too small, floors too slippery, and kitchen cabinets too high to reach. For aging adults, a home designed for optimal accessibility, convenience, and safety is imperative to avoid falls or serious injuries.

Optimizing a home for safe and comfortable living while creating a home environment that makes getting around easier is essential for aging in place. That's why we've gathered the most common home modifications, from simple adjustments to larger remodeling projects.

## General Home modifications to aid in mobility

- **Install handrails.** For aging in place, add handrails to stairs, hallways, bedrooms, and bathrooms for extra balance.
- **Upgrade the lighting.** Replace existing bulbs with LED bulbs to increase visibility. Consider installing touch-activated lamps, and placing night lights in the bedroom, bathroom, and hallways.
- **Install lever door handles.** Switch out standard round doorknobs for lever-style handles. These do not require the same level of grip.
- **Install a stairlift.** This is a great alternative when walking up stairs becomes more difficult. Install light switches at the top and bottom of the stairs to prevent your loved one from using stairs in the dark.
- **Install motorized automated blinds.** This style of window treatment allows aging adults to adjust their blinds without having to stand up.
- **Create an open floor plan.** Make wide passageways throughout the home with little obstruction. Widen doorways and hallways if your loved one uses a walker or wheelchair to navigate their home.
- **Replace hardwood, tile, laminate, or vinyl flooring for carpet.** If your loved one doesn't use a wheelchair, carpet will be most forgiving and provides more floor consistency.

## For the living room

- **Rearrange furniture and remove clutter.** To avoid tripping hazards, be sure furniture placement leaves plenty of space to move about the room safely.

- **Install anti-slip mats.** Add strips to the bottom of rugs to increase traction and reduce the chances of tripping.
- **Replace unsteady furniture.** Discard furniture that wobbles to prevent falls, and add plastic bumpers to the sharp edges on furniture pieces.

### For the kitchen

- **Keep daily-use items accessible.** Store small appliances, cookware, and tableware between waist and shoulder height to avoid the need to crouch down or use a step stool.
- **Consider purchasing a stovetop with an automatic shut-off feature.** Once the sensors fail to detect motion for an extended period of time, the stove will shut off.
- **Install a hands-free faucet and anti-scald device.** Easily turn the water on and off with the wave of a hand, and install an anti-scald device to avoid the possibility of burns.
- **Replace kitchen cabinets and adjust counter and sink height.** For a more convenient storage space, install drawers, open shelving, or pull out shelves. Choose a counter height where it's easy to prepare meals and wash dishes while sitting.
- **Adjust the location of major appliances.** Place the oven, sink, and refrigerator as close to each other as possible.

### For the bathroom

- **Add adhesive strips to a bath mat in showers and tubs.** This can help prevent slipping on wet surfaces.
- **Install non-skid strips in case the flooring becomes slippery.** Try to avoid ceramic tile as this can become slick when it's wet.
- **Install a walk-in bathtub or shower transfer bench.** This can greatly reduce the chances of slipping and falling. Climbing in and out of a traditional bathtub or standing for an extended period of time may become more difficult.
- **Install grab bars or rails in bathtubs and near the toilet.** This will improve mobility and help to prevent falls.
- **Install a raised toilet seat.** An elevated toilet seat decreases the distance between standing and sitting.

### For the home's exterior

- **Create at least one no-step entry into the home.** Replace exterior stairs with a removable ramp for a smooth transition into and out of the home.
- **Add exterior lighting and landscape lighting.** To avoid falling or tripping, add outdoor lighting to walkways and stairs.
- **Install handrails.** Add handrails on both sides of walkways for extra support and balance.
- **Low maintenance materials.** Opt for vinyl siding, metal roofing, composite decking, and low maintenance landscaping.
- **Install a security system.** A home security system can give your loved one a sense of security and protection.



## How to pay for home modifications

While in the end, it's generally less expensive to age in place as opposed to living in a senior living community, the upfront costs for a remodel can add up. Luckily there are resources and programs available, such as home improvement grants, equipment loans, and low-interest loans.

You should also consider researching programs like Medicare Advantage, Non-Medicaid Government assistance and Medicaid HCBS Waivers, Veterans programs, and non-profit organizations for financial help. As you're crunching the numbers, it's important to remember that the cost associated with home modifications has two components: the labor cost and the materials cost. Oftentimes, the cost of labor for installing the equipment will not be covered by insurance.

## Create a support system with senior care and services

Forming a support system for your loved one is a big part of aging in place. Besides the support from family members, it's a good idea to consider senior care and services for your aging parent. There is a network of services available, including meal delivery, nurses, transportation, and house cleaning services.

In-home care services are also offered at various levels depending on the situation. On days when you're unavailable, an elder companion could spend time with your loved one to prevent social isolation, maybe playing cards, reading, or talking with them. In-home caregivers can provide help with day-to-day activities like cooking, grooming, or shopping, while also making sure your loved one is safe in their home.

## Introduce technology into your loved one's home

Assistive technology solutions, smart home features, and tech gadgets can be used to help simplify everyday tasks, promote independence, and stay safe while aging in place. There are all sorts of devices, like medical alert devices to signal for help, assistive seating devices to lift your loved one into the standing position, and smart bulbs that can be controlled remotely.

**Individual results may vary.**

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