

Simple Steps Can Prevent Bad Falls

If, as the adage says, "Old age ain't for sissies," the first challenge in the privacy of one's home may well be standing one's ground to avoid a fall. Each year in the United States, one out of every three people older than 65 falls, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Among older adults, falls are the leading cause of injury deaths, according to the National Association for Home Care and Hospice.

What starts as a simple misstep can cause many seniors to lose their health, their independence and even their lives.

What's more, feeling the pinch of the economic downturn, growing numbers of seniors nowadays might be unable to sell their homes -- and therefore need to make them safer, says Dr. Marion Somers, a geriatric care manager in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Some safety solutions may surprise you.

"The single most important thing to remove is throw rugs, even if they have been in place for years," says Jonna Borgdorff, a physical therapist in Oak Park, Ill., and national rehabilitation director for Interim HealthCare, a company that provides home care for the elderly.

Borgdorff's organization offers these tips to prevent falls:

- * If you have wall-to-wall carpeting, make sure it is secure and flat, without bunched-up wrinkles or raised areas.
- * Fix poor lighting and add nightlights for trips to the bathroom.
- * In the bathroom, non-skid adhesive textured strips in the tub or shower floor can help prevent falls, while a plastic shower chair can help ease access in and out of the tub. Likewise, a raised toilet seat with armrests may provide balance both for sitting down and getting up.
- * Add handrails on steps and grab bars on bathroom walls. Handrails placed near the toilet, bathtub or shower, can help someone stay balanced when sitting or standing.
- * In the kitchen, forgo slippery floor wax. Keep kitchen items in cabinets that are easily accessible, at waist-high level.
- * On stairs, pay particular attention to the top and bottom, where you may miss a step. Consider adding stair treads and handrails on both sides. Be particularly cautious when walking between a carpeted room and a slippery floor. If walking on stairs is perilous, consider adding a stair chair that electrically glides up and down the steps.

Some pitfalls are less obvious: Don't be blind to high thresholds in doorways, says John O'Callaghan, president of the Metro Louisville (Ky.) Aging in Place Council.

Speaking of the floor, clear any clutter there, which is particularly hazardous for nighttime trips from bedroom to bathroom, he says.

Above all, when the golden years usher in an era of change to your home, try to keep the decor cheery.

Being reminded that decline may be on the horizon is never attractive," says Borgdorff. "An idea to consider that may put a positive spin on the process is to look at it as redecorating."

In other words, she says, while you're seeking the advice of a home care professional for functional changes; also consider a decorator to infuse those changes with a new personal touch.