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## Tip Sheet: Home Renovation for Older Adults Who Want to Age in Their Communities

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### **What's the Problem?**

As we age, our mobility and physical strength diminish and many aspects of a home that were once functional become difficult.

Poor eyesight, mobility problems, balance issues, impaired motor skills and dementia are all very serious risk factors for older adults, age 65 and older, as potential causes of injuries or accidents at home.

Each year, millions of older people fall. In fact, more than one out of four older people have falls each year, but less than half tell their doctor. Falling once doubles your chances of falling again. Six out of every 10 falls happen at home, where older adults spend much of their time.

For many older adults, living well means living comfortably at home. As people age, physical challenges can make it hard to get around the house. One solution is to remodel the space to accommodate these challenges. Renovations that help people's mobility can reduce social isolation as we age. Contrary to popular stereotypes, the majority of older adults close to retirement age cannot afford to, or do not choose to pack up and move to warmer climates in their retirement years.

### **Who's at Risk?**

According to a 2011 AARP research report, almost 90 percent of people over age 65 would rather remain at home as long as they are able, and 80 percent of older Americans have firm plans to stay put. Preparing your home for the "golden years" is a long-term project that should be started as early as possible — preferably well before middle age. Appropriate adaptations will often prevent the most common accidents that may ultimately rob people of their independence.

## **Home Improvements Ideas**

In order to age well in their current home, older adults may need to consider potential repairs and improvements. Below are a few of many steps and purchases one can make to ensure a safer, healthier home for the long haul.

### *Removing trip hazards throughout the home.*

One of the easiest ways to reduce falls in the home is to remove anything that could be a trip hazard in the home. Items include rugs anywhere in the house, cords, cluttered furniture, and other items that create a challenging walking path. Other ideas are looking at where pet food and supplies are in the house and considering if they could be moved away from natural traffic flow of a home.

### *In-home monitoring service.*

Several companies that have traditionally provided home safety technology to alert for burglary, fires, and carbon monoxide poisoning are now offering in-home monitoring services for older adults. Other options include installing lower-cost devices, such as Google Home or Amazon's "Alexa" services, and syncing it up with smart phones to call loved ones if a person needs help while in the home. While these services will not help older people move around easier, they may help family members worry less about an older loved one living at home alone.

### *Put grab bars in bathrooms.*

These heavy bars installed in the shower or near toilets can help prevent falls because of slippery tubs, shower stalls, and floors. Many manufacturers are designing bars to be more aesthetically pleasing and match other bathroom fixtures, instead of making one's home look like the inside of a hospital bathroom. Some bars use suction technology and do not have to be built into the walls – a good option for someone renting their home.

### *Install lever-style doorknobs.*

Levers are usually easier to grip than round doorknobs, and they don't require a twisting motion. That can be especially helpful for people who have arthritis or other conditions that limit motion.

### *Replace flooring with slip-resistant material.*

Vinyl and linoleum can provide more traction than slick, hard stone floors, and the somewhat softer material can be more forgiving when someone falls.

### *Add a wheelchair ramp.*

Even if no one in the home has an immediate need for a wheelchair, a ramp can eliminate the need to climb stairs to enter the home.

### *Install a chair lift or elevator.*

If a home has multiple levels, an elevator or chair lift that attaches to stairs can help seniors move between floors.

### *Adjust kitchen countertops.*

Regular countertops stand about 34 inches off the floor; installing cabinets and countertops at a more accessible 30 inches can make it easier for someone using a wheelchair or scooter to prepare food.

### *Widen doorways.*

If doorways are narrower than 32 inches, you may need to expand them to accommodate a wheelchair or other mobility device.

## **Additional Resources**

The National Association of Home Builders has a Certified Aging-in-Place Specialist designation for contractors who help homeowners remodel to accommodate elderly loved ones. You can contact a CAPS professional to get advice on modifications, plan a renovation and find qualified contractors.

Plan ahead for your older loved one's needs so that s/he can safely age in place called "home." Unfortunately, Medicare does not pay for physical home renovations, so most renovations must be paid out of pocket. There are several state programs in place to ease the burden. The USDA's Very Low-Income Housing Repair program can offer up to \$7,500 in grants and up to \$20,000 in 1% interest loans for eligible seniors. There may also be state-specific programs for your area, so check with your local Area Agency on Aging to see what may be available. Rebuilding Together, a national volunteer organization, works with local affiliates to assist low-income seniors with home modification efforts.

If an older adult's needs can't be met in the current home, such as location to medical services or family members, it might be time to make a change and relocate to a more suitable community and home. This is usually a difficult transition, but with preplanning and modest changes, this can often be avoided.

## **The Bottom Line**

Many people prefer to live in familiar surroundings as they grow older. Completing a home renovation — with an eye toward elder care needs — can help older adults maintain independence while enjoying the comforts of home.

## **Case Example**

After Maryann Connelly's mother, Catherine Fisher, fell and hurt herself two years ago, Maryann considered moving her to an assisted living facility.

But Catherine, who is in her 80s and has lived on her own for 18 years, had a two-word response, "no way," even though her rheumatoid arthritis made it difficult to walk up and down stairs and get in and out of chairs.

Maryann and her siblings hired an occupational therapist and contractors to modify Catherine's two-story townhouse in Newton, N.J., to make it safer and easier for her to navigate.

The therapist and the contractors added, among other things, an electric stair lift and grab bars throughout the house. Catherine's chairs were also raised to make getting in and out them easier and threshold ramps and railings were installed at the front door to make it safer for her to leave and enter the house on her own.

The total cost, for the therapist's fee, equipment and installation was \$4,500.

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