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# THE SAFE LIVING GUIDE



*A guide to home safety for seniors*

Canada

# THE SAFE



# LIVING GUIDE

*A guide to home safety for seniors*

***To promote and protect the health of Canadians through leadership, partnership, innovation and action in public health.***

—Public Health Agency of Canada

***The Safe Living Guide—A guide to home safety for seniors***

is available on the Internet at the following address:

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# Table of contents

- 5 **There's no place like home... but...**
- 6 **The facts: Seniors and injury in Canada**
- 7 **The facts: Aging brings changes**

## **Keeping your home safe**

- 9 **Outside and inside—Checklists**
- 18 **Eileen's story**

## **Keeping yourself healthy and active**

- 19 **Nutrition—Checklist**
- 20 **Physical activity—Checklist**
- 21 **Eleanor's story**

## **Keeping track of your medicine**

- 23 **Medication safety—Checklist**
- 25 **Margaret's story**

## **Keeping safe with safety aids**

- 26 **Useful aids**
- 31 **Peter's story**

## **Keeping safe through adapting your home**

- 32 **Useful changes**
  - 34 **Stan's story**
  - 35 **You CAN prevent falls!**
  - 36 **For more information...**
-



# There's no place like home... but...

**T**here's no place like home—and sometimes it seems like there's no place safer. For seniors, however, the home is where many injuries occur, and most of these are due to falls. Changes that are part of the normal aging process, such as declining vision, hearing, sense of touch or smell and bone density can increase the risk of injury. Injuries can also be more of a problem for seniors because, as the body ages, it takes longer to heal and recover from injury.

You might think that “accidents just happen” and that nothing can really be done to prevent them. Not so. By taking some simple measures, you can considerably reduce your chances of being injured at home. It's a matter of knowing what the potential hazards are, taking precautions and making adjustments. These changes can make a big difference!

This guide provides advice on how to prevent injuries by keeping your home, yourself and your environment as safe as you can. Checklists allow you to verify and increase the safety of your surroundings and lifestyle, and real-life stories offer testimony to the value of adapting.

As the old saying goes: “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” Inspecting your home and taking action to prevent home injuries can help you to live comfortably and safely for many years to come. We hope you will find this guide to be a practical tool to help you along the way.



# **The facts:**

## **Seniors and injury in Canada**

### **Falls cause injuries and death**

Falls account for more than half of all injuries among Canadians 65 years and over. One third of community-dwelling Canadian seniors experience one fall each year and half of those will fall more than once. The likelihood of dying from a fall-related injury increases with age; among seniors, 20% of deaths related to injury can be traced back to a fall.

### **Hospitalization**

Falls account for 34% of all injury-related hospital admissions and 85% of seniors' injury-related hospitalizations, making this the leading cause of injury-related admissions for seniors. Forty percent of seniors' falls result in hip fractures and half of those who break their hips will never recover full functioning; women sustain 75–80% of all hip fractures and one in five older adults will die within 12 months of suffering a hip fracture.

### **Cost of injuries**

Apart from personal suffering, loss of independence and lower quality of life, the costs of seniors' injuries to the health system are enormous—approximately \$2 billion annually is spent on direct health care costs. Seniors' falls are also responsible for 40% of admissions to nursing homes.

### **Where injuries occur**

Nearly half of all injuries among seniors occur at home. The bathroom and stairs are particularly hazardous due to the risk of slipping, tripping and stumbling.

### **Fear of falling**

Seniors who fall may limit their activities for fear of falling again. Yet by limiting activities, they are likely to lose strength and flexibility, and increase their risk of falling again. Maintaining physical activity is essential if you wish to prevent falls and injury.

# **The facts:**

## **Aging brings changes**

Aging affects each individual differently. Some seniors experience physical limitations that seriously affect their level of activity while others are able to remain quite active. The natural process of growing older, however, generally includes changes in abilities. If you're experiencing some of the problems associated with the changes described below, consult your health professional and make sure you undertake whatever changes or adaptations will help you cope and compensate.

### **Vision**

Eyes take longer to adjust from dark to light and vice versa, and become more sensitive to glare from sunlight or unshielded light bulbs. There is a decline in depth perception that can make it hard to judge distances. Perceiving contrasts and colours can also be more difficult.

### **Touch, smell and hearing**

Sensitivity to heat, pain and pressure decreases; this may make it more difficult to detect a liquid's temperature or changes in ground or floor surfaces. Sense of smell diminishes, making it harder to smell spoiled food, leaking gas and smoke. Hearing loss can result in difficulty hearing telephones, doorbells, smoke alarms, etc.; it can also result in a decrease in balance, which can make falling more likely.

### **Bone density**

Bones naturally become less dense and weaker with age. Bone loss (osteoporosis) among seniors can be worsened by lack of exercise and nutritional deficiencies. Bone loss can lead to painful fractures, disfigurement, lowered self-esteem and a reduction or loss of mobility.

### **Balance and gait**

Balance is a complex function involving eyes, inner ear, muscular strength and joint flexibility. Any one of these can change as a result of aging. A general decline in equilibrium can make it more difficult to maintain or recover balance, meaning that a slip or trip can become a fall. The speed of walking, the height to which the heels are lifted, and the length of a person's stride can change with age. These changes can make it more likely for someone to experience a fall.



## Memory

In general, sharp brains tend to stay sharp. Cognitive processing and memory may take a bit longer, but this is a normal effect of aging. This is why it's important to make lists and keep phone numbers handy.



Most seniors develop effective coping mechanisms as they age. Being aware of the normal changes of aging allows you to plan for home and lifestyle adaptations that will help you retain your health, quality of life and independence.

# Keeping your home safe

Injuries can result from seemingly innocent things around your home—many of which are easily fixed or adapted after you do some detective work to track them down. The following checklists will help you inspect your home for evidence of trouble that may be waiting to happen. Every NO answer is a clue that your home may not be as safe as it could be and that you should be making the needed changes as soon as you can. Your safety depends on it!

## Checklists:

### Outside

|   | Yes                      | No                       |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| • Do all your entrances have an outdoor light?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do your outdoor stairs, pathways or decks have railings and provide good traction (i.e. textured surfaces)? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Are the front steps and walkways around your house in good repair and free of clutter, snow or leaves?      | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do the doorways to your balcony or deck have a low sill or threshold?                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Can you reach your mailbox safely and easily?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Is the number of your house clearly visible from the street and well lit at night?                          | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |



If you live in a rural area and don't have a visible house number, make sure your name is on your mailbox and keep a clear description of directions to your home (main roads, landmarks, etc.) by each phone in your house.

# Inside

|  | Yes                      | No                       |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| • Are all rooms and hallways in your home well lit?                                | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Are all throw rugs and scatter mats secured in place to keep them from slipping? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Have you removed scatter mats from the top of the stairs and high traffic areas? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Are your high traffic areas clear of obstacles?                                  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do you always watch that your pets are not underfoot?                            | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • If you use floor wax, do you use the non-skid kind?                              | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do you have a first aid kit and know where it is?                                | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do you have a list of emergency numbers near all phones?                         | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |



Install a seat at the entrance of your home to remove or put on your shoes and boots.

**Avoid throw rugs and scatter mats. They're dangerous!**

# Stairs

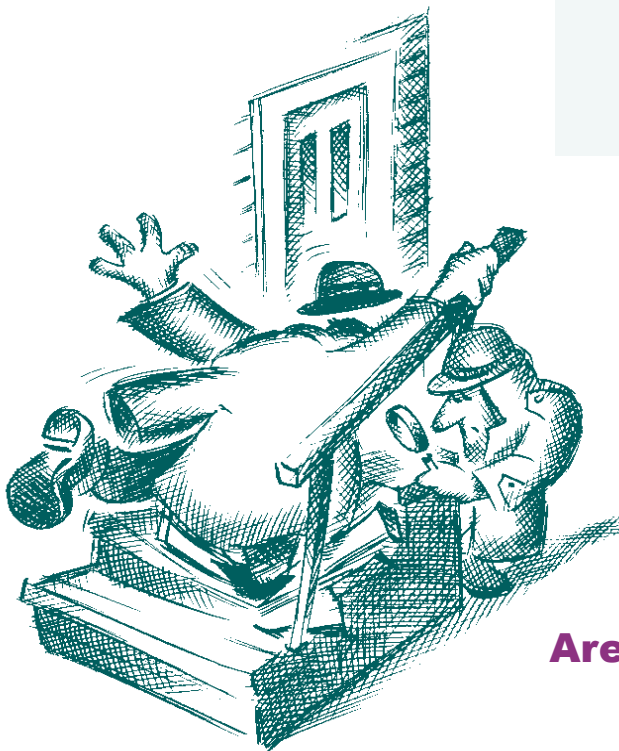
|   | Yes                      | No                       |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| • Are your stairways well lit and do you have light switches at the top and bottom of the stairs? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Are your stairs in good repair and free of clutter?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do the steps of your stairs have a non-skid surface?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Are there solid handrails on both sides of the stairway?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do you remove your reading glasses when using the stairs?                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

## TIPS



To help avoid taking a misstep, you can paint wooden or concrete steps with a strip of contrasting colour on the edge of each step or on the top and bottom steps.

Don't rush going up or down stairs. Rushing is a major cause of falls.



Are your stairs in good repair?

## Fire and hazardous materials

|   | Yes                      | No                       |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| • Do you have a smoke detector on every floor of your home?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do you test your smoke detector every six months?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Have you developed an escape route in case of fire and a fire safety plan?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Are you registered on your apartment building's fire safety plan?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do you have a carbon monoxide detector in your home?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Are flammable and hazardous materials clearly labelled and properly stored?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • If you use a space heater, is it placed well away from flammable substances and materials?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do you use appropriate power bars to prevent overloading electrical outlets?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • If you live in an older home, have you or an electrician inspected your wiring, fuse box, electrical cords and appliances for safety? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do you have a fire extinguisher and know how to use it?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |



To remember to test your smoke detector twice a year, make a habit of testing it when you turn your clocks forward in the spring and back in the fall.

# Bathroom

|   | <b>Yes</b>               | <b>No</b>                |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| • Do you test the water temperature before you get into the bathtub or shower?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Is your hot water temperature set to the recommended 49°C (120°F)?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do you have non-slip surfaces in the tub or shower?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do bath mats next to the tub or shower have rubberized backing or are they secured in place to keep them from slipping?       | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do you have a night light in the bathroom?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Does your bathroom door lock have an emergency release?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do you have grab bars that have been properly placed and well anchored to the wall in the bathtub or shower?                  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • If you have any trouble getting on and off the toilet, do you have a raised toilet seat and a grab bar that is well anchored? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • If it's difficult for you to take a shower standing up, have you considered a bath seat?                                      | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Do you need a raised toilet seat?



Some tile and bath cleaning products actually increase slipperiness. Be careful when using such products.



# Kitchen

|  | Yes                      | No                       |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| • Are your pots and pans, canned goods and staple foods stored in an easy-to-reach location—between knee and shoulder heights? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Are heavy items stored in the lower cupboards and light items in the higher cupboards?                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do you have a stable step stool (with a safety rail) for reaching high places?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Are the “off” and “on” positions on the stove dials clearly marked?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Are your oven mitts within easy reach when you are cooking?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do you make sure never to cook while wearing loose-fitting clothing or sleepwear?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do you have a fire extinguisher in the kitchen, mounted on the wall away from the stove?                                     | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do you regularly check that your fire extinguisher is in good operating order?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

## TIP



Use heat-resistant oven mitts rather than potholders; they provide a better grip on hot containers and give you better protection against splatters and steam. If you do experience a burn, immerse in cool water (not ice or butter!).

*Are your oven mitts in a handy location?*





# Bedroom

- Is there a light switch near the entrance to your bedroom?
- Do you have a lamp or a light switch near your bed?
- Do you keep night lights or other sources of light on in case you get up in the middle of the night?
- Is there a clear path from your bed to the bathroom?
- Do you have a phone and a list of emergency phone numbers near your bed?

**Yes**    **No**



Make sure your bed is not too high or low, so that it is easy to get in and out of it.

You can purchase short bed rails to steady yourself when getting out of bed.



**Is there a clear path from your bed to the bathroom ?**



## Garage/Basement/Workroom

|   | Yes                      | No                       |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| • Are your workroom and laundry room well lit?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do you have a telephone in the basement and a list of emergency phone numbers?                                      | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do you keep floors and benches clean to reduce fire and tripping hazards?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Are all your tools and service equipment in good condition? Are the safety locks on?                                | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Is your work area well ventilated, summer and winter?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Are heavy items on lower shelves or in bottom cupboards?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do you use a ladder or a stable step stool (with a safety rail) for reaching high places?                           | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Are all chemicals, such as bleach, cleaners and paint thinners, clearly identified?                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Are flammable materials stored as indicated by the directions on the label and away from sources of heat and flame? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • If you have a gas barbecue, is your propane tank stored outside of the house?                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |



When you use a ladder, never stand or sit on the top three rungs. Maintain your balance by keeping your body centred between the rails, not reaching to the sides and not pushing or pulling on anything.

# Childproofing

*(a must, for doting grandparents)*

|   | <b>Yes</b>               | <b>No</b>                |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| • Have you removed items from your lower surfaces to prevent breakage, injury and spills?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Child-resistant caps are not childproof. Are all medications and pill boxes stored out of the reach of children?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Are household products and chemicals, such as cleaning products, paint, paint thinners and alcohol, stored and locked in a cupboard that is out of the reach of children? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Are cosmetic products, such as nail polish remover, creams, mouthwash and perfumes, out of the reach of children?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Have you stored small objects out of the sight and reach of younger children to prevent choking?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Have you stored lighters, matches and candles out of the sight and reach of children?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Have you installed safety catches on your cupboards and medicine cabinet doors?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Have you purchased safety gates for stairs or unsafe rooms?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Is there a safety latch on your stove and dishwasher?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Are extension, telephone and venetian blind cords out of children's way?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Are your garage and workshop locked with deadbolts installed high on the doors?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |



If you have a pool, or if there's one in the building where you live, exercise extreme vigilance. Make sure the pool is absolutely off-limits to children by installing safety devices on house doors leading to the pool and a very high latch on the pool fence gates. Never leave any child without supervision.



# Eileen's story

**W**hen Eileen Shannon was taking care of her ailing mother-in-law, she decided to get grab bars installed in the bathroom. She also got a bath seat. She was pretty familiar with safety devices and she knew her mother-in-law needed the support in the bathroom. Now, several years later, Eileen is surprised to find herself using those same grab bars. Although Eileen is fairly healthy, she did have two unexpected bouts of illness. “I thought, I’m 69, I won’t need those things. But when you get ill, and you come back from the hospital and you’re weak, you’re mighty glad to have that bar on the bathtub wall.”

Eileen’s house has other safety features that she installed and finds handy, such as improved lighting, night lights, and lever taps that are easy to turn. As she lives in a large house and her home is the place where everyone gathers for family get-togethers, she has also childproofed the rooms. When she looks ahead to the future, she sees herself remaining in this house safely for a long time to come.



# Keeping yourself healthy and active

What does home safety have to do with fitness and food? Plenty! Spending time and energy on your health can provide a big pay-off. You'll not only feel better, you'll be considerably reducing your chances of having a fall or other injury.

## Benefits of healthy eating

The foods you eat build and maintain your body. With age, your body continues to need essential nutrients to function correctly. Food deficiencies in seniors can cause or increase the risk of bone loss, heart disease, diabetes, arthritis, etc.—all of which increase your risk of falling. *Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide* provides general guidelines on the foods you need to maintain or improve your health. This *Guide* is available on Health Canada's Web site ([www.hc-sc.gc.ca](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca)) or through 1 800 O-Canada (see page 36).

Healthy eating promotes a healthy heart, strong bones and good resistance to infection and injury. Eating poorly, skipping meals or not eating enough can cause weakness and dizziness, and increase your risk of a fall. That's also why it's so important to eat regular, well-balanced meals every day.

## Checklist:

### Nutrition

|  | Yes                      | No                       |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| • Have you checked out <i>Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide</i> to understand your basic nutritional needs? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do you eat a variety of foods from each food group every day?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do you eat a variety of fruits and vegetables?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do you often choose whole grain and enriched products?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do you often choose lower-fat foods and milk products?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do you select leaner meats, poultry and fish, as well as dried peas, beans and lentils?                      | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Skipping meals can cause weakness and dizziness. Do you eat at regular times?                                | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

## Benefits of active living

Remaining physically active also reduces your risk of falling by giving you more flexible joints, stronger bones and muscles, better heart and lung function, more energy, less fatigue, better sleep and less anxiety and depression. Being active includes everyday activities, such as walking, climbing stairs, gardening and shopping, as well as exercise classes and recreational activities like swimming, golfing and Tai Chi. Whatever your current physical condition, you can engage in some form of physical activity with the help of your doctor.

The Public Health Agency of Canada's *Physical Activity Tips for Older Adults* explain why physical activity is important for seniors and offer easy ways to increase your level of activity. These *Tips* are available online.

## Checklist:

### Physical activity

|  | Yes                      | No                       |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| • Have you checked out the <i>Physical Activity Tips for Older Adults</i> ?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Have you had a check-up recently and talked to your doctor about increasing your physical activity?                        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do you make sure you have regular and appropriate physical activity that stimulates your muscles and heart?                | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do you choose physical activity whenever you can (walk instead of taking the car, use the stairs instead of the elevator)? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

There's no time like the present. Even when physical activity starts in later life, it can lead to significant improvements in your health and quality of life. Choose activities that will build your endurance, increase your flexibility and improve your strength and balance. Remember to check with your doctor first and to start slowly.

# Eleanor's story

In Eleanor Mills' opinion, "it's absolutely never too late" to start exercising. When she was 68 years old, Eleanor was almost bedridden and "barely able to teeter across a room." When she was 81 years old, however, she was leading five-kilometre walks in cities across the country.

Eleanor had advanced osteoporosis, a disease in which the bones become so thin and brittle that they break easily. In time, several of her vertebrae collapsed, and three years later she suffered further fractures. "With the pain and agony and the lack of activity—because I could hardly do anything at all—I went down to 46% bone density. I really began to feel like a china cup walking around because it really is about half the strength you should have."

Eleanor knew that one of the best ways to improve her condition was to be active. She started challenging herself to walk a little bit each day. "I was in terribly bad shape," she says. "I only kept going because I knew that if you keep still, you lose more bone than ever. It goes much faster." Through exercise, good nutrition and medical treatment, Eleanor eventually increased her bone density by 20%.

A turning point came when Eleanor first tried a walker. "I simply flew along, and I said to myself, 'Gee, I could walk to Vancouver with this.'" It was Eleanor's idea to form what was called the "Boney Express," a series of walks to raise money for, and awareness of, osteoporosis.



Eleanor admits that when she first used the walker, she felt a little strange and wondered what people would think. “There are many people who have resisted getting a walker because it sort of labelled them as unable. And I did feel a little odd pushing around what seemed like an empty chair because my walker has a seat. But that is so much offset by the value of the walker that I very soon got over it. I think we should welcome all the aids we can find, and we must be proud that we can do so much more when we use them.”

One of Eleanor’s goals is to try walking for the whole day. As she puts it, “I just want to see how far I can go.”



# Keeping track of your medicine

Seniors may be more prone to illness due to the weakening of the body's natural defences. It's not surprising, therefore, that many require a greater number of drugs to treat their health problems. Because seniors also tend to have more than one health problem, they may receive multiple prescriptions or they may combine prescription drugs with over-the-counter products or with natural remedies. Given that the aging body is more sensitive to the effects of many medications, the combinations can cancel the benefits of any or all medications and produce adverse reactions, such as memory loss, sleepiness, agitation and confusion. These effects have been associated with falls and other injuries.

## Checklist:

### Medication safety

|  | Yes                      | No                       |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| • Have you talked to your health care professional about alternatives to medication? (Medication may not always be the best solution.)   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Have you told all your doctors and your pharmacist about all of the medicine you're taking (prescription, over-the-counter or herbal) as well as your use of alcohol and/or tobacco? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do you read the instructions on each of your medication containers to check for side effects or possible ill effects of combining one medication with another?                       | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do you take your medication exactly as prescribed or know of any alternative instructions should you forget to take it?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Do you have a list of what medications you are currently taking, and is your family aware of it?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |



- If you have medication allergies, do you wear a bracelet or necklace to show this?
- If you react to a medicine or experience side effects, do you report it to your doctor or pharmacist?
- Do you use only one pharmacy for all your prescription needs?
- Have you gone through your medicine cabinet and discarded any medicines that are past the “Best before” date?
- Whenever you get a new medicine, do you ask for and obtain all the information on its use and side effects?

**Yes**   **No**

|                          |                          |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |



Don't mix drugs and alcohol. Alcohol can react with many common medications, including tranquilizers, sleeping pills, cold or allergy medicines, high blood pressure pills and pain medication.

To inform your doctor or pharmacist about all the medications you take, put all your medications, including herbal remedies, over-the-counter and non-prescription medicines in a bag and take it to your next doctor's appointment or pharmacy visit.

If your medication causes dizziness or sleepiness, adjust your activities so you aren't at risk of falling.

# Margaret's story

**M**argaret Deschamps believes in being on top of the medications she's taking. One of her friends suffered from an accidental overdose of medication because she'd gone to two different doctors and was prescribed two different drugs with similar ingredients. Margaret has always been careful about her medicine, and this made her even more so.

"I make sure I know everything there is to know about my medication's side effects and bad combinations. I've found out that there's one pill I take that can't be combined with grapefruit! It's really important to ask the questions. There's no reason to be afraid: you ask, and you get an answer. When you go to the drugstore, they can write everything down for you [about your medication], the side effects and all. They'll even check if you're taking medication from another doctor."

As Margaret explains, "You can often have several doctors: a general practitioner, a heart specialist, a rheumatologist, etc. And one doesn't always know what the other ones are giving you. But if you go to the same drugstore and you're prescribed something that, along with your other medication, could cause an adverse reaction or an overdose, they can let you know. They can contact the doctors, if necessary. This is a marvelous service that many drugstores offer now."



# Keeping safe with safety aids

Many of the products on the market today can make your life easier, more enjoyable and safer. Many are not very expensive, and some would make nice gifts. These products can be found in hardware stores, pharmacies, medical supply stores, mail-order catalogues and other specialty stores. Also look in the Yellow Pages under “Senior Citizens’ Services and Centres,” “Hospital Equipment and Supplies,” “Medical Equipment and Supplies” and “Orthopedic Appliances.”

## Useful aids

### For walking

**Canes** can be a handy aid for walking, and these days they come in some fashionable styles too. It’s very important to make sure your cane is the right height and the rubber tips are checked every once in a while to ensure they are still in good shape. Wrist straps can be attached to your cane to prevent dropping. A clip can be put on the cane so that it will hang on the edge of a table or walker.

**Cane spikes** fit over the end of your cane for extra grip on an icy day. Spikes with four or five prongs are best. Many spike attachments flip up or down as needed. The spikes should be flipped up or taken off your cane when you enter a store or shopping mall, as the spike can slip on floor surfaces.

**Safety soles** are anti-skid detachable soles with studded treads that make walking safer in the wintertime.

The safest design is a full sole that runs the entire length of the shoe. These have to be removed when you are walking indoors, such as in a shopping mall, since they will slip on floor surfaces.



**Walkers**—If walking for 20 minutes without help is a problem for you, an inside or an outside walker could be worth having. With a walker, you can go further, longer and, with some models, you can even have a seat when you want to take a rest. Many models also come with a basket for carrying packages. Special tote bags, trays, and cane and oxygen holders that attach to the walker can also be purchased.

**Appropriate footwear**—Comfortable shoes that provide good support can help to prevent falls. Lower heels are easier on your feet and back and are more stable for walking. Elastic laces are available to make laced shoes easier to get on and off. Beware: easy-on shoes or slippers without fitting around the heel (i.e. backless) can be dangerous; shoes with smooth, slippery soles can cause you to fall; and composition soles, such as crepe soles, can stick to carpets and cause you to trip.

## Bathroom aids

Ensure that you have **non-slip surfaces** in the tub or shower. There are products available, i.e. anti-slip liquids, that can be applied directly to the tub itself to create a non-slip surface.

**Bath mats on the floor** beside the tub should have rubberized or non-skid backing.

**Bath seats** allow you to take a shower sitting down. If you have trouble standing, or if you find it difficult to lower yourself into the tub, a bath seat will help you. Some models are specially designed to make it easier to get in and out of the tub.

**Grab bars and poles** can be installed by the bathtub or shower and beside the toilet to provide more stability and help prevent slips and falls. Grab bars must be anchored firmly into the studs in the wall. Towel racks or soap dishes should never be used for support! Floor-to-ceiling poles, securely installed, can also help to steady you while getting out of bed or while dressing.



**Hand-held shower heads** can make showering easier, especially if you're using a bath seat. The shower head can also be installed with two or three mounting positions, allowing it to be used by standing or seated bathers. This type of shower head is inexpensive, widely available and relatively easy to install.

**Raised toilet seats** (by 10 to 15 cm) can make getting on and off the toilet easier. There are many designs available—some adjustable, some portable and some with safety/hand rails.

## Kitchen aids

An **automatic shut-off** is featured on many appliances, such as kettles, irons, electric frying pans, toaster ovens. The switch turns the appliance off once it has been idle for a few minutes' time, eliminating the potential risk of fire.

**Large-handle utensils** give you a better grip. So do L-shaped knives and heavy cutlery. Find out what's available for cooking and eating safely.

**Pot stabilizers** consist of a wire frame that keeps pots from spinning while you're stirring the contents. Since this item holds the pot handle in place, it can also prevent the cook or any children from accidentally knocking the pot off the stove. **Pot watchers** are small ceramic disks that are inserted in the pot to prevent boiling over. These can be purchased in most kitchen gadget stores.

**Stepladders** can keep you from harm. Don't risk your safety reaching for an item on your top shelves. Get someone to reach for you or use a short stepladder with a grab bar.

**Reachers** are very useful for those who have trouble bending or reaching high places. Many have suction cups, grips or magnets on the ends to ensure a firm grip on the object to be reached.





## Vision aids

There are a number of technologies available to help you with vision loss, from sunglasses to large playing cards, and from large pad touch-tone phones to magnifying glasses. Vision rehabilitation clinics and a wide range of assistive devices are available across the country in eye care centres and through the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB).



## Hearing aids

Most people report significant benefits from hearing aids—in family relationships, mental health and other areas that affect the quality of their lives. Devices, such as a hearing aid, a telephone handset with built-in volume control, and a flashing light to signal when your doorbell or telephone rings, can help to compensate for loss of hearing. Keep in mind that choosing a hearing aid is a very individual process and the right device for you depends on your preferences and the nature of your hearing problem. Ask your family doctor about regular hearing testing, and if required, consult a qualified hearing health professional for the trial and purchase of a hearing aid.

## Memory aids

There are a number of ways to compensate for memory loss, such as writing down information, using pictures on containers and cupboards to label contents and putting your medications in pill organizers. Some technologies are also available, such as talking clocks and vibrating watches. Important factors in stabilizing memory with age are physical activity, a healthy diet and social activities.

## Other aids

**Cordless and cellular telephones** can be safer because the receiver can be separated from the telephone's base, eliminating the need to run telephone cords across a room or across frequently travelled areas. You can keep the phone close at hand and don't have to run to answer it; you can sit in your favourite chair while you talk.

**Medication organizers** (dosettes) are compartment boxes designed to help you keep track of medications. They're available in drugstores.

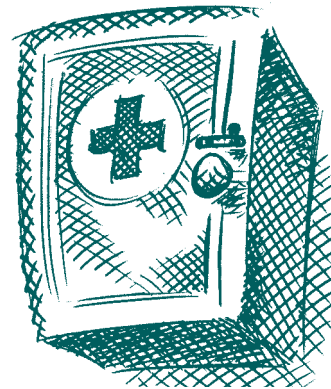
**Wire/cord clips** enable you to tack down electrical and telephone cords along the walls so they don't run across the floors, where they're more likely to cause you to trip. You can find these clips at most hardware stores.

**Emergency response systems** are communication devices that will get help for you in case of an emergency. A variety of businesses and some non-profit organizations are involved in this kind of service. The company will install the device in your home for a minimal price and then charge a monthly fee to monitor the unit. You wear a wristwatch or pendant-type of device with a call button, which you press in case of an emergency. To find out more about these devices, look in the Yellow Pages under "Medical Alarms."

**First aid kits** can be a godsend when there's an emergency. Make up your own first aid kit or purchase one from a reputable provider. Take note of where you keep it.

## Asking for help

One of your best aids is your own voice. Don't hesitate to ask for help when you need it. Most people are delighted to be of assistance, and asking for help may well respond to your neighbours' and friends' need to be useful and to enjoy your company! All kinds of community and health services are available, for example, Meals on Wheels. Asking for help is also a way to keep safe by making your environment aware of your presence and your needs.



**For more information on assistive devices, read *Go for it! A guide to choosing and using assistive devices*. To obtain this publication, see page 36.**

# Peter's story

**P**eter is a 75-year-old veteran who was severely paralyzed in a car accident. A keen volunteer, he had enjoyed working with students at his local library. After his accident, he underwent therapy but worried that he would not regain his autonomy or remain a useful member of society. His health and spirits sagged.

The therapy paid off and he was eventually able to sit and use an electric chair. From then on, Peter began to reclaim his life. "My objective was to become useful again. At first, I was very wary of trying new gadgets and aids. I felt it made me look vulnerable."

With time, Peter learned to navigate his wheelchair with art. He also learned to use the computer to write because of his weak right hand and acquired many of the bathroom and kitchen aids that facilitate his daily activities. He started to use Meals on Wheels and has become great friends with the senior who makes the deliveries.

He returned to his volunteer work when at his request, the library gladly had the three-step entrance made level and provided facilities for him to use the washroom. He now enjoys his students again and feels very much part of the community.

"I don't care who sees me using aids anymore, I just want to stay safe. And I try to get all the help I can. It feels good knowing that my neighbours know me!"





# Keeping safe through adapting your home

If you're thinking of renovating, why not consider adding a few additional safety features to your home to help make it a comfortable and safer place for years to come? Should you decide to move, the increased safety and accessibility could also be selling features. Word of mouth is often the best way to find reliable tradespeople to do renovations. Ask friends and acquaintances for information, and be sure to get price quotes from at least two potential contractors. The following suggestions will give you some ideas for your renovation planning.

## Useful changes

### Lighting and switches

It's important to have plenty of well-positioned and well-diffused lighting. If you're having electrical work done, consider adding lighting in high traffic areas, in stairways, in closets and over the bathroom sink and kitchen work areas. Install switches at the top and bottom of your stairs. Consider installing all switches lower on the walls if someone in your household uses a wheelchair. Rocker switches are easier to use. Dimmer switches allow you to leave certain lights on low, for example, between the bedroom and bathroom.

### Electrical outlets

Adding more electrical outlets will help prevent overloading or having to run electrical cords across areas where they may be in the way. Extension cords should never be used on a permanent basis since this presents a fire hazard. Power bars can help prevent short circuits and fires.

### Doors

If you plan to work on or replace a door, check the height of the door sill or threshold. It should be no more than 1/2" (13 mm) high. It may be a good idea to reduce or remove the door sill because uneven surfaces can lead to a trip or a fall. You may also want to widen doorways to accommodate wheelchairs or replace doorknobs with lever handles, which are easier to use. Also, consider the advantages of sliding or swinging doors, and doors that open outward.

## Stairs

The backs of stairs should be closed in. There should be firmly anchored handrails on both sides of the stairway, which extend beyond the top and bottom steps and are mounted far enough out from the wall to allow for a solid grip. In addition, the stairway should be well lit and the steps should have a non-skid surface.

## Flooring

If you're replacing flooring, use non-glare, slip-resistant flooring material. A hard floor surface or tight pile carpeting is best. Consider using the same floor surface over different areas in order to eliminate uneven surfaces.

## Shelving

For efficiency and convenience in your kitchen, consider adding lower level shelves, for example, between the counter top and cupboard level. Lower cupboards, sliding shelves and lazy susans in cupboard corners put kitchen items within easier reach. You may also wish to install lower shelves in your pantry and closets.

## Taps, shower heads, grab bars

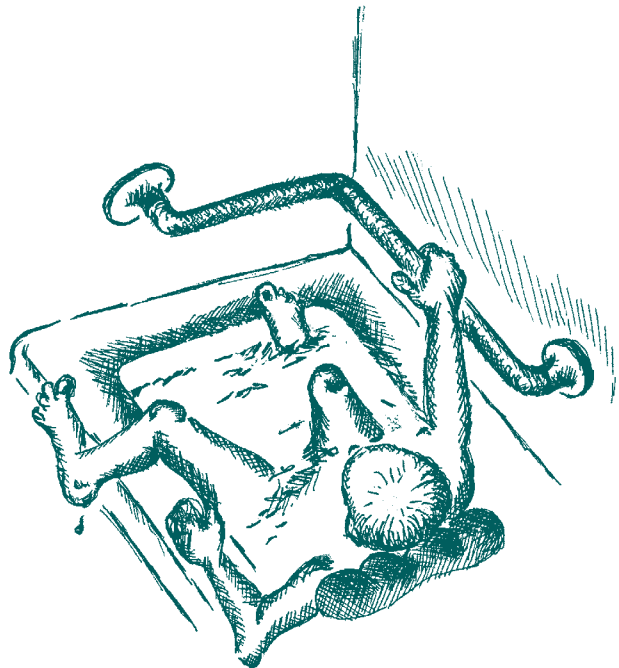
If you plan to replace your kitchen or bathroom taps, lever-type or control-arm-type faucet handles are easier to use. When you add grab bars, make sure to install them solidly on the wall studs. A hand-held shower head is easier to use when using a bath seat.

## Locks and latches

Door locks in bathrooms must have an emergency release. Locks and latches should have large, easily manipulated knobs or levers. The market now has models that offer both safety and security, such as push-button or card-access locks.

## Workroom

Windows and overhead lights are a must. Additional lighting should also be available over benches and stationary tools. Adequate ventilation systems are needed to vent smoke, fumes and exhaust gases. Open windows and doors may provide enough ventilation in the summer but not in the winter. The wiring must be of adequate capacity to handle lighting, heating and power tool requirements.



# Stan's story

**S**even years ago, when the Krzaniaks decided to have some renovations done to their home, they were thinking ahead to the future: they had a small laundry room built on the back of their three-bedroom bungalow. “When everything is on one floor, it’s like living in a condominium, really,” says Stan.

The Krzaniaks also added other safety features to the house. “We installed rails on both sides of the stairs to the basement. We have a total of six telephones in the house—if a telephone rings, you never have to run! We have smoke detectors and lots of lights. One thing we might add later on is rails along the hall, or wherever we’ve got an open wall. That’s a small thing to do.”

Stan recently suffered a heart attack. He now participates in mall walking to help recuperate. He has also started hiring people to do many of the outdoor chores he used to do himself—like shoveling snow and digging the garden. The Krzaniaks are fortunate to have the savings to spend this way. In Stan’s opinion, it’s money well spent. “I think you have to balance the benefits against the expense. If you look at the number of people who’ve fallen down with heart attacks while shoveling snow—why, it probably pays to get someone to do it.”

The Krzaniaks feel that the precautions they’re taking around the house are their way of promoting their independence for a long time to come.



# You CAN prevent falls!

Falls are by far the leading cause of seniors' injuries and injury-related hospitalization in Canada. They cause pain and, for many, lead to a move from home to a care establishment. They often cost seniors their independence and quality of life. They also represent huge costs to our health system. Yet most falls incurred by seniors are preventable.

Whether you live in a house, a condo or an apartment, living safely at home requires adapting your environment, your behaviour and your lifestyle to the normal changes that age brings.

You need to make sure **your home** is safe. This may involve installing brighter lighting, moving your furniture around, uncluttering your floors, rethinking the arrangement of your storage shelves, putting in night lights or getting a good fire extinguisher.

You need to keep **yourself healthy** and active. Whatever your physical condition, it's never too late to eat well and to be more active. Consult your health professional if you're in doubt about a new diet or a new exercise program. Not only will this benefit your overall health and increase your resistance to disease, it will also help you maintain the balance and strength you need to ward off falls and serious injury at home and elsewhere.

You need to recognize that **assistive devices** and gadgets are a smart way to make your everyday life easier, independent and safe. Find out which are available and use them!

Every change you make to adapt your home and to stay healthy will help keep you from falls and injury. We hope that this guide has provided you with many suggestions that will allow you to remain safely in your own home for many years to come.

*Public Health Agency of Canada  
Division of Aging and Seniors*

# For more information...

To help seniors maintain and enhance their health, safety and well-being, many Canadian organizations offer information, products and services on everything from medication safety and injury prevention to home adaptation and assistive devices. A few of these organizations are listed below:

**Active Living Coalition for Older Adults**

**Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation**

**Canada Safety Council**

**Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists**

**Canadian Home Care Association**

**Canadian National Institute for the Blind**

**Canadian Physiotherapy Association**

**Canadian Red Cross**

**Consumer Product Safety Bureau**

**Institute for Positive Health for Seniors**

**Kino-Québec**

**Meals on Wheels**

**Rx&D - Canada's Research-Based Pharmaceutical Companies**

**Seniors Canada Online**

**Smartrisk**

## **Division of Aging and Seniors (DAS) Public Health Agency of Canada**

Address Locator: 1908A1

Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0K9

Tel: 613-952-7606

Fax: 613-957-9938

TDD/TTY: 1-800-267-1245

E-mail: [seniors-aines@phac-aspc.gc.ca](mailto:seniors-aines@phac-aspc.gc.ca)

Web site: [www.publichealth.gc.ca/seniors](http://www.publichealth.gc.ca/seniors)

### Other DAS publications

- *Go for it!—A guide to choosing and using assistive devices*
- *Bruno and Alice—A love story in twelve parts about seniors and safety*
- *12 steps to stair safety at home*
- *Stay safe! (poster)*
- *You CAN prevent falls!*
- *If you fall or witness a fall, do you know what to do?*
- *What to do after a fall... (poster)*

To obtain information on all Government of Canada programs and services:

Toll-Free: 1 800 O-Canada

(1-800-622-6232)

TTY: 1-800-926-9105

