



# HOME MODIFICATION

*Your Key to Comfort, Safety and Independent Living*



*As people grow older, changes in physical abilities can make daily routines more difficult.*

Climbing stairs, bathing, and preparing meals can become more challenging. People often adjust their personal behavior to offset their house's shortcomings. This doesn't have to happen. AARP has four brochures with partner Home Depot that provide practical and helpful information about the kitchen, bathroom, hallways and lighting. Home modification can be a key factor in increasing the likelihood of staying independent and injury-free in your home for as long as possible.

Eighty nine percent of older Americans say they want to stay in their current home and community as they age.<sup>1</sup> Hiring an expert to make home modifications is not always necessary. There are many simple things that you can do to make a home safer and more comfortable. Conducting a home safety check can help prevent problems that could lead to injury and/or loss of independence. Walk through your home and identify the potential safety risks. For example, are the exterior pathways, porches and doorways well lit?

Are the doorknobs easy to use? Are the handrails secured on both sides of the steps? Is the bathtub or shower floor slippery? Do you have area rugs that aren't secured to the floor? If you notice these types of hazards, fix the problem or ask a relative or neighbor to help you make your home safer.

As people age, their homes are also aging. Many older adults are living in structures that are deteriorating to the point that they are hazardous to their health. Develop a maintenance plan and do the identified tasks this year and every year. If performing regular maintenance is difficult for you, hire a reputable handyman or enlist the help of your family and friends. Although the tasks may vary, a few things you can do to keep your home in top shape may include checking the smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, inspecting the caulking around sinks and tubs, draining the water from the water heater and the refrigerator pan, checking the weather stripping and seals around windows and doors.

Sometimes larger-scale, more complicated modifications to a home may be needed. These could include building no-step entries, creating one-story living space with bedroom and bath, widening doorways and hallways or adding floor space so that it is more wheelchair accessible. Finding the right skilled help for a modification project requires more than just opening your telephone directory. Unfortunately, there are bogus repair contractors who will take your money and run, so before you hire anyone you need to do

your homework and check their credentials.

The AARP and Home Depot have joined forces to help you identify safety concerns and simple renovations that can improve your quality of life and lengthen your ability to stay in your own home. Here you will learn more about areas of concern in a normal structure and issues that affect many older adults who choose to stay in their homes.

### **Kitchens: You Can't Live With Them, You Can't Live Without Them**

Memories are made in the kitchen. It's where even the busiest of families come together, but it is often the place where accidents happen. In the kitchen, a little improvement can go a long way. For instance, by adding an anti-scald device to your sink, you can reduce the risk of hot water burns. Under cabinet task lighting can brighten your counter tops and your eyes will thank you. Make sure you have a can grabber and a sturdy step stool with non-slip steps and grip handles to help reach items on high shelves.

If you are building a new kitchen or planning a major renovation, build your countertops as well as your sink at 36 inches from the floor. Look for pull down shelving and slide out drawers that let you access pantry items and dishware with less effort. If you are in the market for a new appliance, consider an elevated dishwasher and a side-by-side refrigerator that will save your back from bending and reaching. All of these upgrades will dramatically increase your kitchen's safety, efficiency and comfort.

## Bathrooms: Make the Out House, Your Favorite Room In the House

It doesn't take much to improve the safety and comfort of your bathroom. In fact, a few simple changes can add to the serenity of the most private place in your home. A long, hot shower or bath is one of life's little pleasures, though not without hazards. By adding an inexpensive non-slip mat, you can easily reduce your chances of falling. Install grab bars for additional support. Consider purchasing a hand-held shower and a bath/shower chair for even greater comfort.

Whether brushing, flossing, shaving or applying makeup, we spend a lot of time at the sink. Features like a tilting and magnifying mirror can give you a better view. For those with arthritis, replace twist knobs with motion sensing faucets or level handles. If your counter tops have sharp edges, consider asking a licensed contractor to smooth them out so they'll be safer in case of a fall.

Got a sore back? Bad knees? Adding grab bars next to the toilet will make getting up and down easier. Also, raising your toilet to 17 inches with a toilet seat extender or purchasing a new toilet that is elongated and at least 17 inches high will make all the difference.

## Hallways and Lighting: You'll Feel Freer and Younger Than You Have in Years

Did you know that a 60-year-old needs approximately twice the level of light as a 20-

year-old? Brighten your home and sharpen your vision today. Lighting plays an important role in our homes. It affects our mood, the look of our furnishings and our vision. Boosting indoor and outdoor lighting is actually one of the easiest ways to make your home safer and more livable. A full-spectrum bulb, a floor lamp or a night-light can make a big difference.

Find out what type of lighting works best for you. Rocker switches are easy on the hands. Touch control or clapper lamps are even easier to use. Three-way bulbs and dimmers can quickly increase or decrease lighting in the room and full spectrum bulbs can reduce glare and eyestrain. Automatic night lights are great for bathrooms, bedrooms and closets and floodlights with motion sensors are perfect for outdoors. Improving the lighting is as easy as flipping the switch.

Reports show that more than 75 percent of all falls occur in the home.<sup>2</sup> Difficult doorknobs, steep stairways and narrow entryways are common irritations that we all seem to live with, but it doesn't have to be that way. Do your hallways feel cramped? Ideally, they should be 36 inches wide and your doorways should be a minimum of 32 inches in width. Make sure you remove the clutter that may be causing your claustrophobia and consider adding offset door hinges to add 2 more inches of clearance space to a narrow doorway.

In addition, your entranceway and front door can be improved by installing an add-on ramp

or handrails on both sides of a staircase. Is the doorway threshold clearly visible? Secure throw rugs or doormats with double-sided stick tape. Get a lighted doorbell and a peephole to make answering your front door easier and safer at night. Consider lever door handles that are more comfortable for those with limited hand use and install track lighting and light color paint in your foyer and hallways.

Making a few of these improvements to your home should make them easier, safer and more comfortable for years to come.

### (Footnotes)

<sup>1</sup> AARP, *These Four Walls*. "Americans 45+ Talk About Home and Community, May 2003

<sup>2</sup> University of Maryland Medicine Website, "Preventing Falls" [www.umm.edu](http://www.umm.edu).

# We are

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Brochures can be downloaded  
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## We couldn't be your voice in Washington without being your neighbor in North Carolina.



AARP is working hard to bring about positive social change. We advocate for state and federal policies to allow people to live independently in their homes for as long as possible, and we provide valuable information on simple modifications to help make homes more user-friendly as residents age.

AARP advocates for health care reform and long-term financial security; offers education, support and encouragement to family caregivers; speaks out on behalf of 50+ workers; and works to improve the livability of communities.

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