

MAKING HOME SAFER for an Older Adult

RESOURCE

COUNSELOR

ADVOCATE

FRIEND





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Creative Care Management (CCM) is a professional story and a personal story.

Charlotte Bishop started CCM more than 20 years ago. Soon after that Charlotte's husband was diagnosed with brain cancer. Charlotte became her own spouse's personal case manager until his untimely death three years later. This personal journey evolved into a professional journey and certification as a Geriatric Care Manager (GCM) and the part of CCM dedicated to "Serving Elders and Others."

Creative Care Management is a team of certificated professionals providing answers to older adults in Illinois and their families.

Making Home Safer for an Older Adult

Everyone's abilities and needs change as they age, but a home's physical space can remain the same as it was twenty or more years ago. It's important not to wait until there is an accident to make changes that can help accommodate an older person's needs. Given that, it's easy to presume that the decision rests in placing a loved one in a home, assisted living facility, nursing facility or some other new residence. There are, however, other options.

The professional assessment of an elder's "activities of daily living" (ADLs) can help evaluate how a person is caring for themselves.

The ADLs are:

- ✓ Hygiene
- ✓ Continence
- ✓ Toileting
- ✓ Dressing
- ✓ Eating and transferring

As a GCM, I often do what you might call an audit of the older adult's home while they are there. In that audit, I look for signs of what they can and cannot do for themselves and what may pose as hazards given their abilities.

Take for example, hygiene. Even a cursory observation can tell you if the older person has bathed or shaved recently, if their

clothes are clean, etc. It can be as easy as securing the services of a home care aid who can be present in the mornings or evenings or even just a few times a week to help with personal grooming or showering. Dressing is linked to this – and more frequent visits may prove necessary. The older individual's range of motion might be limited, making it difficult to easily get in or out of clothes.

With continence, the family may notice that there has been "an accident." Remember, however, that this is highly embarrassing to the older adult. They might even be embarrassed to purchase adult diapers at a store. A possible fix is simply making the purchases discreetly for them. Toileting itself could become difficult due to diminished dexterity. Grip bars in the bathroom as well as an elevated seat for the commode may be in order.

You can also assess how well the older adult is able to feed themselves by either seeing them at the dining table or just checking their clothes for evidence of spills. Are they not eating or losing weight? They might need someone to prepare nutritious meals, because it is a real pain to cook only for one.

The Mitten Test



If you live in the upper portions of the U.S., your winter mittens have another useful purpose that can help you make home an easier place for your older loved ones. As our bodies age, certain nerve pathways begin to fail, and the human anatomy uncannily reroutes many of the circuits as they stop firing. But with age, more and more of those pathways slow or fail for a variety of reasons, and it just makes it harder for older adults to do the simple manual tasks they used to do without even a thought. Turning a door knob, turning on a lamp or taking the lid off a jar becomes challenging, maybe even impossible.

It might be hard for those of you in the prime of your lives to really understand this, no matter how empathetic. So I recommend an easy exercise to help you experience what this erosion of manual dexterity and fine motor skills feels like. Doing so can also help identify challenging hardware or activities that can be more easily managed with a bit of creative help.

With a pair of mittens, walk through each of the rooms in your elder loved one's home and go through the normal activities of the person who lives in those rooms. As you enter a room, it could be challenging to flip a light switch or twist the switch on a lamp with your hands in mittens. This is remedied by retrofitting wall switches with the larger rectangular switches. These can be pressed on and off. Likewise, the lamp twist switches can be replaced with wider winged grips. And even before you enter a room, your undoing might be a small or slippery door knob. In this case, handles are an appropriate replacement.

The mittens are effective barriers to everything from opening the ketchup bottle to a twisting the lid on a jar of apple sauce. And if a key itself is hard for an older loved one to grip when opening a door, hardware stores have over-sized sheaths to make gripping easier.

With your mittens still on, attempt to tie your shoes laces or button a shirt. It may be time to get creative with Velcro-equipped shoes or other substitute hardware for buttons. The number of tools to help with some of these issues, or "assistive devices," will amaze you. You'll find television remote controls, computer access and more. Check out the Department of Health and Human Services Assistive Technology site to learn more about assistive devices, services, and technology. (http://www.eldercare.gov/ELDERCARE.NET/Public/Resources/Factsheets/Assistive_Technology.aspx)

And with your mittens, try going through the motions of other self-grooming activities to determine what challenges are manageable and which are just out of reach.

Safer Bathrooms



The bathroom is a place where most accidents happen. For most elders, it represents the perfect storm - a confined space combined with potentially slippery surfaces. Nearly one-third of seniors over age 65 fall each year, and the majority of these falls happen in the bathroom. But with basic planning and potentially some retrofitting, the bathroom can be more safe and accommodating to an older person's limited mobility and range of motion. Let's start with surfaces.

If there's rug near the shower or bath area, make certain it has a sticky, non-slip back to minimize falls when an elder enters or leaves the tub. Having a non-slip, moisture-absorbent surface near the tub is a safety assist, but any other loose rugs should be replaced or eliminated. Look for uneven floor surfaces or thresholds and consider eliminating them, beveling surfaces or highlighting them with paint or tape. Loose cords from radios or hair dryers should be removed from walkways, and other floor level clutter like magazine racks should also be eliminated.

If there's rug near the shower or bath area, make certain it has a sticky, non-slip back to minimize falls when an elder enters or leaves the tub.

If your older loved one uses a floor mat in the tub area when showering, make sure that the suction cups still attach well. You may consider adhesive decals that stick to the porcelain tub surface with soft gripping rubber top surfaces. In the shower area itself, consider having a bath bench or chair with non-slip feet if your elder has difficulty standing for protracted periods or is at all unsteady on their feet. If your elder loved one has trouble lifting their feet over the tub edge to step in for a shower, you can refit their bath with a stall shower that has a low or minimal curb.

Just as in hallways, consider installing grip bars at strategic points in and around the tub or shower. For seniors with difficulty getting up from chairs, consider a raised seat for the commode as well as grip bars that flank the sides of the seat like arms on a chair. There are even hydraulic assistive devices that can be installed on the toilet seat with a lift that can help ease the senior into a seated position and then boost them slowly back up as they rise from sitting.

Lighting is as important in the bath area as it is in the rest of the house. If the present circuits allow, upgrading to a higher wattage bulb in all the fixtures is an easy fix. In old houses, however, it may be safer to install new fixtures that can offer more lighting. And as with other parts of the house, have a night light that automatically goes on when ambient lighting fades.

Finally, make sure that everything that your elder may need while in the bathroom is within easy reach. Remove actual glassware or ceramics from the bath and replace with plastic, especially cups that have gripping texture on the outside. And while you are outfitting the bath, keep in mind bright colors and pleasant decoration. Just because your bath is now safe does not mean it has to look institutional.



In conversations with your loved one, reinforce that stepping onto chairs to reach a shelf is always a fall hazard. If practical, move frequently used items to lower shelves or to the counter top. Consider the assistive grab devices that can be easily used to retrieve items from higher shelves.

Safer Kitchens

Some of the same preventive measures that work for the bath can also apply to the kitchen. However, the kitchen poses some of its own unique hazards. Let's start with surfaces. As with the bath, beware of scatter rugs in front of sinks or food preparation areas. Areas that are targets for water or grease spills should have non-slip mats or nothing at all. Check all thresholds leading to and from the kitchen to be sure there are no trip hazards for individuals whose stride may be devolving to a shuffle. For individuals who are unsteady on their feet, consider grip bars in key spots. Check the walkways in and around dining areas to make sure there is enough clearance for easy mobility. Also, look for electric cords or clutter on the floor.

Maximize the light while also minimizing the shadows by seeing how much wattage can be accommodated by lighting fixtures. In addition, place night lights in strategic parts of the kitchen to aid with walking late at night. As with the bath, you may also consider the night lights that automatically turn on when the ambient light falls beneath a critical threshold.

As a person ages, items on upper shelves can be out of reach. Facilitate easier access to upper shelves with a step stool that has a grip bar on top. In conversations with your loved one, reinforce that stepping onto chairs to reach a shelf is always a fall hazard. If practical, move frequently used items to lower shelves or to the counter top. Consider the assistive grab devices that can be easily used to retrieve items from higher shelves. Find this and other assistive devices at PattersonMedical.com. Beware of heavier items that may fall on the reacher.

Gripping can be a challenge to individuals as they age, especially cast iron skillets – great for cooking, but hard to manage. With less manual strength, opening jars or bottles might be difficult too. Gripping devices that fit over the lid can make turning or twisting a great deal easier. Check out kitchen and other supply stores like the Container Store for these devices. (<http://www.containerstore.com/shop/kitchen/foodPrep/>) Similarly, there are accommodating tools that can help with cutting, can opening and other day to day tasks that require nimble hands or stronger grips. There also are nonslip bowls, cups, knives and more.

If your loved one leaves the lights on or the ice cream out on the counter, they will not pose a safety hazard. If the gas stove is left on or an oven is left baking, these can be real fire risks. Consider getting portable timers that your elder can carry with them after cooking starts. It is better that they have the time with them so that they hear the alarm when it goes off instead of a timer that goes off where they may not hear it.

One more caution regarding the stove. If your loved one retains a gas stove, talk to them about avoiding loose-fitting clothes that could catch fire. If there has been a real accident already, either disconnect the stove (with the help of a professional), or replace it with an electric cook top.



CCM, Inc. can be there when you can't

We are the professionals who help families who are caring for older adults (geriatric care management) or others with special needs. Our professional geriatric care managers and special needs case managers can be your eyes and ears when you simply cannot. You can count on us to help you manage both your care-giving responsibilities, and those of your family and your work that cannot be ignored...or postponed. Some of our clients refer to us as their Sister in ChicagoSM.

We serve Chicago's North side and the North, Northwest and West suburbs as well as Central Illinois.

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