

## Avoiding Falls:

# Making Your Home Safe if You Have Limited Mobility

By David Freeman, WebMD Feature

People of any age can have trouble getting around the house – a teenager recovering from a sports injury, a baby boomer in rehab from a heart attack or surgery, an elderly person with arthritis or balance problems. Whether your limited mobility is temporary or permanent, there are many things you can do to make your home safer and your life easier.

Modifying your home can be as simple as rearranging some furniture or putting in a few handrails in strategic locations. This room-by-room guide focuses on simple solutions to creating a safe haven. But it also includes more substantial measures that can be worthwhile if you have long-term mobility issues.

## Preventing Falls: Make a Smooth Entrance

Building entrances can be safety hazards, especially in bad weather. And when it's difficult to get around, even a step or two can seem like a mountain. Make sure the path from the street to your front door is well lit and clear of objects.

If you have stairs, make sure there's a sturdy handrail -- on *both* sides, if that helps. "Adding a second banister on the other side can make a huge difference, especially if one side of the body is more impaired than the other," says Carla A. Chase, EdD, assistant professor of occupational therapy at the Western Michigan University College of Health and Human Services in Kalamazoo.

Even if there's just one step that is difficult to negotiate at the front door, consider installing a grab bar. You can also rent a ramp for walkers and wheelchairs if you need a temporary solution.

## Home Safety: Be Creative in the Kitchen

You can be kitchen savvy with simple solutions that minimize stretching, bending, lifting, and carrying:

- **Don't leave things hanging.** Put pans on a countertop rack -- or simply leave them out on the stove -- instead of hanging them or putting them in a drawer. Store plates, bowls, cups, and other heavy-use items in a single, easily accessible drawer or shelf, not spread around the room. Try to reserve high shelves for things you don't need often.

- **Invest in a reacher.** These clever, inexpensive tools have multiple uses around the house. You can retrieve items from the floor without bending over and from high shelves without using a footstool, which can be a safety hazard. In the kitchen, you can use a reacher to wipe up spills while seated or standing.
- **Stay seated.** Put sturdy chairs with arms in strategic kitchen locations so you can sit when you cut vegetables or do other kitchen tasks. “If you can do everything from a seated position, that’s ideal,” says Tracy L. Van Oss, DHSc, assistant clinical professor of occupational therapy at Quinnipiac University School of Health Science in Hamden, Conn.
- **Let shelving do the heavy lifting.** Slide-out shelving or a Lazy Susan -- a round, revolving tray -- in corner cabinets and refrigerators can make things easier to reach. A wheeled cart such as a tea cart is a little more of a financial investment but can provide extra storage and help move heavy items safely and easily. For example, use it to move a pot from the refrigerator to the cooking range.
- **Keep the floor dry.** Kitchen floors are prone to spills. Have paper towels and a reacher handy for cleanup.

## Easy Living Tips for the Living Room

Four minor adjustments can have a major impact in the living room:

- **Rearrange the furniture.** No matter how good the current arrangement looks, you won’t enjoy your living room if it means navigating an obstacle course every time you’re in it. Arrange the furniture around your needs: Move anything that makes it more difficult to get around. If you use a walker or wheelchair, allow extra room around furniture. Lower furniture pieces such as ottomans and coffee tables can be a special hazard, so make sure they are well out of the way.
- **Make seating more comfortable.** Chairs and sofas shouldn’t be so low that you have to drop into them or strain to get up. Simply adding a pillow for height can be a temporary solution. Better yet, buy some inexpensive risers to raise the seat under the legs.
- **Take up the rugs.** Carpeting and limited mobility don’t go well together. The best temporary solution for throw rugs is to roll them up and move them out of the way to prevent tripping. At the very least, make sure there is non-slip mat underneath a rug and that the rug lies flat, with no edges or corners sticking up. Use tape, if necessary, to keep them down.

- **De-clutter.** For smooth moving, get rid of clutter and make sure electric cords and telephone wires aren't tripping hazards.

### **Keeping Balance in the Bedroom**

Your bedroom is your sanctuary. To keep it that way:

- **Make your bedroom easily accessible.** Going up and down stairs can be exhausting -- and dangerous -- if you have impaired mobility or balance problems. Consider converting a room on the main floor of your home into a bedroom if your bedroom is upstairs. Then move your bath and grooming products to a downstairs bathroom.
- **Make your bed comfortable.** Extra pillows can help if joint pain makes it difficult to get comfortable in bed. If you have trouble getting in and out of a bed that is too low, put it on risers to make it easier. If it's still tough to get up, add a bedside grab rail.
- **Keep essentials handy.** Put drinking water, pills, a flashlight, a telephone, and important phone numbers on a nightstand -- on *your* side of the bed. If it might be necessary to summon help from a caregiver nearby in the house, keep a bell on the nightstand, too. Or buy an inexpensive wireless doorbell if the person is farther away. "Just knowing that it's possible to get help in the middle of the night can be very reassuring," Chase says.
- **Be ready when nature calls at night.** If you usually wake at night to use the bathroom, install a night-light or two to help you get there safely. If you'd rather not venture that far at night, it may be worthwhile to purchase a portable commode for your bedroom. An even more convenient and less expensive option for men is a plastic urinal -- an appropriately shaped container with a lid -- which can be used in bed. "A male urinal is a lot cleaner and nicer to use than using a bedside commode," Chase says.
- **Make dressing easier.** Sitting in a sturdy armchair to dress and undress can be more stable than sitting on a bed or standing. And you can use the arms to steady yourself when you sit down, reach, or stand up. Use a long-handled shoehorn to put on shoes without bending over. A dressing stick -- essentially a stick with a hook at the end -- can help you pull on pants or skirts, take off socks, and reach clothes that are hung up high.

### **Making the Bathroom a Slip-Free Zone**

Bathrooms are hot spots for falls and injuries. Fortunately, many bathroom safety measures are simple and inexpensive:

- **Don't rush in the bathroom.** Hurrying can make you less careful. "That's why we tell our clients not to wait too long before going to the bathroom," Chase says.
- **Install skid-free mats.** Low-pile, non-skid bathmats can prevent falls on wet and slippery floors. Non-slip mats or appliqués are also helpful in the tub or shower.
- **Put in extra seating.** If your bathroom is big enough, put a sturdy chair by the sink so you can brush your teeth and groom yourself while seated. Safety chairs designed for use in the shower may be helpful, although they can also be expensive.
- **Don't bend and stretch.** "Bending over to pick up a shampoo bottle or soap is another hazard," Van Oss says. Instead, put in a bath organizer, shelf, or wall-mounted dispenser for shampoo, conditioner, and liquid soap. A long-handled scrub brush makes it easier to wash feet, legs, and other hard-to-reach places. A standing toilet paper holder can help if it's difficult to reach a wall-mounted holder.
- **Make it easy to get up.** A toilet seat riser or toilet safety rails (with or without a toilet seat) are helpful if you have trouble getting up or down from the toilet. A grab bar or two next to the toilet is another option.

## **Bigger Home Modifications**

Substantial home modifications can get pricey. But they can also be worthwhile investments for long-term mobility issues. Here are some common problems and solutions for better mobility and fewer falls.

**Outside.** Is there a high curb that's difficult to step over? Look into having it cut down. Is the garage door sticking or too heavy to lift? Consider an automatic door. Are stairs a big problem? Covering them with a ramp can offer easier mobility if you use a walker or wheelchair.

**Narrow doorways.** Most wheelchairs and walkers require an opening at least 36 inches wide. If you only need another inch or two of clearance in your doorway, you can replace conventional door hinges with double-jointed "swing-away" hinges. If privacy is not important, you can also remove the door altogether. In other cases, you may need to widen doorways or install pocket doors.

**Uneven floor surfaces.** It's best to replace thick carpets with dense, low-pile carpet or leave the floors uncovered if you have mobility problems. Hardwood floors are the ideal

choice. Replace high doorway thresholds between rooms with low, beveled ones, or simply remove them.

**Getting up and down.** If it's impossible to avoid stairs in your home, consider getting a lift: a stair lift, wheelchair lift, or elevator. A ceiling-mounted lift can also help people with limited mobility move from places such as a bed, floor, or toilet.

**Control-free lighting.** Consider installing motion- or sound-activated lights in the bedroom or anywhere you need quick lighting or have difficulty reaching switches. "Something like 'the Clapper' sounds silly, but it can be very useful," Van Oss says.

**Limited hand and finger mobility.** Consider replacing conventional faucet handles in the kitchen and bathroom with easy-to-use levers. You might also equip cabinet doors with D-shaped handles.

**Bath safety solutions.** Glass tub or shower doors can be a big safety hazard. A shower curtain (hung from a spring-loaded pole) is safer in case of a fall. It also affords more room to get in and out of the tub or shower. A walk-in or roll-in shower with a sturdy seat are ideal. For extra safety and convenience while bathing, use a hand-held showerhead.