Seniors’ safety: how to prevent injuries

Seniors value their independence and usually want to stay in their home as long as possible. However, you may often worry about your parents' safety—and with good reason. Statistics show that injuries in the home increase with age. According to Statistics Canada, most fall-related injuries happen in and around the home, about one-quarter of them around stairs and bathrooms. In fact, falls are the leading cause of injury to people over 65. Sadly, a large proportion of seniors' injury-related deaths are the result of falls.



This means that whether your parents are living in their own homes or sharing yours, it is important to ensure that their environment is as safe as possible.

Why are seniors more at risk of injury?

Although aging affects everyone differently, there are some common physical limitations that can have an impact on seniors' abilities. For example, seniors often experience changes to their vision, hearing, sense of touch and smell as well as their balance. While these changes may be subtle and even go unnoticed by the senior, their effects can contribute to falls or other injuries. Here are some sensory changes to watch for in seniors:

Vision

- A decline in perception, causing difficulty judging distances
- Trouble seeing contrasts and colours
- Eyes take longer to adjust from dark to light
- Eyes are more sensitive to the glare of sunlight or bright light

Touch, smell and hearing

- Decreased sensitivity to heat, pain and pressure
- Sense of smell diminishes
- Hearing loss

Balance

- Seniors often experience a decline in equilibrium, making it difficult to recover balance
- Muscular strength and joint flexibility are reduced, affecting balance
- Manner of walking changes—speed, length of stride, etc.—making seniors more prone to falls

Medication. Since seniors are more prone to illness, they often require a number of drugs. Unfortunately, seniors can also be more sensitive to medications, increasing the chances of side effects. When prescription medications are combined with over-the-counter products and/or alcohol, there can be many adverse reactions, such as memory loss, sleepiness and confusion. In this weakened condition, seniors are more prone to injury and falls.

Home safety checklist

You can help prevent injuries and keep seniors safe by checking for potential safety hazards and taking the necessary precautions. Use the following checklist as a guide to inspecting your elders’ home, and adding any safety features required:

Area	What to Look for	Tips for Improving Home Safety

Entrance	• Are the front steps in good repair? • Is the entranceway well lit—inside and out? • Are there non-slip surfaces on the porch, deck and patio?	• Install motion-sensitive exterior lighting • Arrange to have snow and ice cleared from walks and entry stairs in the winter, and leaves cleared in the fall
Bathroom	• Is there a grip bar beside toilet? • Are there grip bars in the shower/ bath? • Is there a non-slip mat in the shower/ bath?	• Install anti-scald devices on showerhead and faucets • Install safety rails and grab bars in the shower and beside the toilet
Bedroom	• Is there a well-lit path from the bed to the bathroom? • Are there a lamp and a phone near the bed?	• Have a night light shine a path from the bed to the bathroom • Place a flashlight beside the bed in case of power outages
Kitchen	• What dangers exist with the stove, floor and cooking tools?	• Be sure the stove and oven dials are clearly marked and easy to read • Be sure floors are not slippery (e.g., no wax) • Ensure pot handles are always turned inwards, to prevent tipping pots • Keep heavy pots and dishes in lower shelves and items used every day within easy reach • Have a sturdy step stool handy
Medications	• Are medications clearly marked? • Do you understand the purpose of each?	• Ask for a medication record that indicates possible interactions between medications • Store medication in a brightly lit room and ask for a print out of medication information if instructions on the label are too hard to read
General Hazards Throughout the Home	• Are there smoke alarms on each level of the home? • Is there an emergency exit and escape plan in case of fire that is usable and accessible by the senior? • Are electrical cords potential tripping hazards? • Is there at least one sturdy handrail beside all stairways? • Is there a light switch at the top and bottom of all stairs? • Is there slip-resistant material on all stairs?	• Keep the floor and stairs free of clutter • Avoid using throw mats or scatter rugs that are not securely attached (not slip resistant) • Move furniture to clear wide paths or walkways in the home • Ensure smoke and carbon monoxide detectors are installed on each floor • Consider installing a security system or intercom system • Have phones accessible in all rooms

Safety first

A little prevention and planning can provide peace of mind. Even after you've inspected your parent's home and made the necessary improvements, it’s a good idea to review the checklist with your parent and have a quick look through their home on a regular basis. For example, every couple of months, check batteries in smoke and carbon monoxide detectors and be sure all stair rails and grab bars are still secure.

Although your parent may feel you are being overly cautious, you will rest assured that you have done all you can to keep them safe.