

Aging In Place with Home Modifications

Many baby boomers anticipate aging in place (at home) as they enter their senior years, but according to a recent AARP study, such expectations may be unrealistic. In a national survey of more than 2,000 people age 45 and up, AARP found that few homes possess the amenities necessary for senior living. The study, entitled “These Four Walls: Americans 45+ Talk About Home and Community” (AARP, 2003) found that only 32% of those surveyed have safety aids in their bathrooms, 54% have non-slip flooring, a mere 13% have emergency alert systems, and just 37% have an entrance to their home without stairs.

Baby boomers may find themselves in the position of caring for aging parents at home, and may also have their own expectations of aging in place. For these goals to become a reality, it seems that certain modifications will need to be made. Below are some examples of home improvements, which can help ensure that at-home care can become a reality.

Kitchens

Consider installing a stovetop that is separate from the oven. This way, the stovetop can be installed according to individual height. Some stovetops have burners beneath glass, or staggered burners, which can reduce the risk of burns.

Separate ovens can also be installed at varying heights. Ovens with doors that swing open sideways, instead of down, can be easier to move around safely. In addition, microwave ovens should be placed at heights that are easy to reach. Leave plenty of counter space in case hot items need to be put down immediately.

Bathrooms

- Handheld showerheads can make bathing children or grandchildren far less strenuous on one’s back. They can also be of great assistance if there is a need to bathe in a seated position. Installing a shower seat that attaches to the wall of the tub and folds down for use can also be very helpful.
- Grab bars installed next to toilets and tubs are an important safety feature. They can be very helpful in maintaining balance, and they can also be purchased in a variety of styles to match home decor.
- Bathroom telephones can be useful in the event of an accident and can provide quick access to the outside world.

Entrances and Doors

- For ease of mobility, consider making doors and hallways at least 36 inches wide. This will be very useful if a wheelchair becomes a necessity. Ramps and lowered steps can be important for the same reason.
- Doorknobs can be difficult to turn with arthritis. Lever doorknobs can make use much easier, and keyless locking systems can also ease strain on arthritic hands. All steps should have handrails for safety. Accordingly, stairs should be deep enough to fit the full length of an adult’s foot.

Exterior

- Make sure the driveway is not an accident waiting to happen by filling in holes or leveling bumps. The same is true for the sidewalk to ensure that a trip into the house or to the car is not an obstacle course.
- The exterior of a home should be well lit. This safety feature can help deter burglars and assist in sure footing. Automatic or sensory lights can also be very useful for this purpose.
- Automatic garage doors are a great help for those with arthritis. They can also spare excessive lifting and tugging, and save the trouble of maneuvering on icy or wet driveways.

The thought of spending one's senior years at home can be very pleasant. For many, this dream can become a simple reality with a few, senior-friendly modifications. For more information visit the AARP website at www.aarp.org/families/home_design/. The site details additional safety features, and includes virtual photos of homes with rooms that have been designed specifically for this purpose.

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