

From Rugs to Rails: Comprehensive Home Safety for Baby Boomers

BY JANET ENGEL

Within the next 6 years, the baby boomer generation (born between 1946 and 1964), are expected to make up one-fourth of North America's population. With age, however, comes the increasing importance of safety at home. Falls among older adults are a public health concern worldwide. According to the World Health Organization, about one third of older adults fall each year. The percentage ranges from 32% to 42% for those 70 years or older.

Falls are the leading cause of injury-related hospitalizations, and injury deaths among people aged 65 or older." The cost of treating fall-related injuries is high. Therefore, it is essential to monitor trends and the burden of falls among older adults.

The Rising Need for Baby Boomer Home Safety

The baby boomer generation continues to be the largest despite the fact, they are aging. There are 76 million in USA and almost 10 million in Canada. With advancing age, mobility becomes a challenge, vision changes are common, and tasks may be more difficult or impossible to complete. Recognizing these challenges, it becomes pivotal to transform properties to fit changing needs. The definition of aging in place is "the ability to stay in your home as your lifestyle changes over time."

Room-by-Room Safety Assessment

Living Room

The living room is a space where we spend quality time with family. But what about those decorative rugs? They might be putting you at risk for a fall. It is safe practice to secure or remove loose rugs as well as to ensure ample lighting throughout the house. I prefer rugs that are heavy and larger (at least 5'x7') because they are less likely to move. Also, rearranging your furniture to create clear pathways will minimize trip hazards.



Kitchen

The kitchen is the most popular room in the house, however, it can present many accessibility challenges and hazards. Store sharp objects safely, and consider using a rubber mat to reduce the chance of slips. Arrange daily-use items within easy reach to minimize the need to use a stool or excessive bending. Install pull-out shelving and drawers with organizers and LED strip lighting. Led strip lighting can be used inside cabinets and drawers as well as underneath cabinets for "wayfinding". Wayfinding is a term used for "the use of signage, color, and other design elements for occupants to navigate a space."

Bathroom

Bathrooms see many accidents, but precautions can significantly reduce a risk of fall. Install decorative grab bars, especially near the bathtub

or shower, and near the toilet. Consider non-slip mats as well as low maintenance, non-skid flooring with a matte finish. Single, lever faucets are ergonomically comfortable especially for arthritic hands. They are easier to turn than knobs, offering ease of use, equitable use, flexibility in use, low physical effort and tolerance for errors - covering five out of seven Principles of Universal Design!

Bedroom

Functionality and accessibility require mattresses to be an appropriate height for the user(s), facilitating getting in and out of bed. Keep a clear pathway for nighttime visits to the bathroom as well as motion sensor night lights and consider having a phone or emergency call device close by.

Stairs and Hallways

If your home has multiple levels, handrails on both sides of staircases can be a lifesaver. So can LED strip lighting and motion sensor lighting. Adequate lighting in hallways and stairs is crucial when it comes to home safety. Designing with color contrast also plays a big role in fall prevention. Color contrast helps distinguish where one surface ends and another begins. This will help prevent spills and falls. Visual perception declines as we age, further increasing the risk for falls.



Tech Innovations for Enhanced Safety

Modern technology can further bolster home safety. Fall alert systems notify emergency contacts in the event of a fall, providing an added layer of security. Motion-sensor lighting illuminates paths when movement is detected, eliminating the need to fumble for switches. Voice-activated systems, such as smart home devices, can control lights, locks, and even thermostats, making everyday tasks simpler and safer.

The Role of Regular Health Check-ups

Home safety isn't just about the environment. Regular vision and hearing tests can catch and address issues early on. Bone density screenings can identify osteoporosis risks, and balance and strength exercises reduce our risk for falls. Furthermore, regular reviews of medication can identify side effects that can increase your fall risk as well as medications that can interact negatively with each other.

Building a Supportive Community

Beyond the physical home, the broader community plays a vital role. Many local organizations provide resources tailored to older adults. Engaging in social activities, feeling connected to nature by exercising

and doing activities outdoors can boost mental well-being and foster a network of care and support.

Not to mention the myriad of health benefits we receive from Vitamin D - stronger bones, better eyesight, positive mood, and improved digestion and sleep patterns.

Home modifications that improve safety, comfort, and function will help people remain independent and ultimately increase our quality of life and enable us to continue to have control over where we call home.

See our [course calendar](#) for complimentary learning: Holistic Home Design.

Janet Engel

Janet is a licensed occupational therapist (OT) in the state of Georgia. Janet is an approved instructor for the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB). She teaches the CAPS Certification Program and Universal Design Essential.

