

Educating Seniors: Bring Your Health... Home

A Monthly Column by Kimberly Harmon, RN, BSN

Your Home Safety Checklist: Ten Steps to Creating a Safe Environment for Your Long Term Stay in Your Own Home

Last month, you learned five critical steps to help you choose the right home health care provider: Building a trusting relationship, taking a holistic approach, developing a customized care plan, finding the right (and qualified!) caregiver, and constantly checking to make sure your customized plan is working.

This month, you'll get a home safety checklist: Ten concrete steps you and your caregiver should implement to make your home—inside and out—a safe place for your long term stay. From installing helpful mobility aids, to moving commonly used items for easily accessible reaching; when you finish reading this column, you'll understand how a little proactive home health care planning can help ensure your peace of mind.

When it comes to creating a safe environment, we consider the inside and outside of your home. Inside your home, consider the following seven helpful hints:

- 1) **Prominently Post Emergency Contact Information:** The first place paramedics look for this information is on your fridge; so place in a very visible location the names and numbers of your physicians and any loved ones who need to be notified in case of emergency.
- 2) **Let There Be Light... In Your Home:** Use nightlights to light dark spaces.
- 3) **Remove Scatter Rugs:** Your feet, walker, or cane can get caught in these types of rugs, causing potentially injurious falls... so remove them!
- 4) **Make Your Home Easy to Navigate:** Create wide pathways through heavily-trafficked rooms by moving furniture to room corners or against walls.
- 5) **Ensure Your Physical Safety:** Hire a carpenter to install grab bars in your bathroom, kitchen, or hallway (wherever you need a boost). If it's too pricy to hire a carpenter, ask a trusted neighbor or relative to help. If you're hesitant to impose, call my friends Mike Mason or Bruce Munsell at A-PRO Building and Renovations (774-535-1469). They'll find a plan that fits your budget.
- 6) **Bathroom safety:** Put non-slip bathmats in your tub or buy a tub-seat with a shower extension so you can bathe in safety. And don't forget the grab bars!
- 7) **Make Your Daily Use Items Easily Accessible:** For example, in the bathroom, keep all of your toiletries in one container. In the kitchen, put your staples at waist-level so you don't have to reach up or bend down. In your fridge, keep the milk, eggs, butter, and other items you use every day on the upper shelves. Set a place where you'll always remember to find your call alert button or portable phone.

It's also important to create a safe environment outside of your home. Here are more helpful hints:

- 8) **Make Your House Easy to Find:** At night, houses look the same. Make yours visible by using big numbers to indicate your address. If possible, install lighting that makes the numbers visible from the street.
- 9) **Stay on Your Feet:** Winter's coming, and with it, snow and ice. A good way to prevent falling on ice is to keep a bucket of kitty litter by your front door, along with a

child's playground shovel. When it's icy, before you leave your house, throw a couple of shovelfulls on your stairs and walkway.

10) **Light There Be Light... Outside Your Home:** If you're still living in a house, install motion-activated lights. I have found these handy and inexpensive tools to be among the most important enhancements to outside safety. They also deter unwanted visitors!

A qualified home health care provider should review all of this with you, as well as take the time to see how you get around, both inside and outside your house. Letting the person you hire see what a typical day in the life of the person receiving care is helpful—not only for the caregiver, but also for the person receiving that care. Everyone will be more comfortable.

If you do have to leave in a hurry, here's a really important tip: Prepare a "Go-Pack". Your Go-Pack is an overnight bag containing lists and doses of your medications, contact information for your doctors, relatives, or other people who need to be notified if you are hospitalized, a nightgown or pajamas, and something familiar—like a picture of a loved one.

Speaking of loved ones, around the holidays each of us can get a little stressed or depressed—the days are shorter, it's colder, and quite often we're separated from a major source of our emotional fulfillment. Try to remember the inspirational words of one of my personal mentors, Florence Nightingale, who said: **"Live your life while you have it. Life is a splendid gift. There is nothing small about it."**

Next month, we'll talk about alternative medicines; and you'll meet my Medical Director, Dr. Robert Hansen. Remember, the essence of home health care is to provide individuals, families and loved ones with services that promote maximum comfort and independence in the home. Please contact me at kharmon@harmonhomecare.com or 508-791-5600 if there are any specific health issues about which you're curious or concerned.

Kimberly Harmon is the Founder & CEO for Harmon Home Health, Inc.

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