Care about a senior citizen in your life? Then make sure his or her home doesn't become a house of horrors. The Centers for Disease Control, in a 2016 report, says it quite succinctly: "Every second of every day in the United States an older adult falls, making falls the number one cause of injuries and deaths from injury among older Americans.

Let that sink in: *Every second of every day* ...
GoodCall® asked the experts about home hazards for senior citizens, and most – though not all – have to do with falling and the aftermath. Again, the facts from the CDC, the National Council on Aging and others are stark:

- About a third of people age 65 or older fall each year. The incidence of repeat falls is high – two-thirds of those who fall will fall again within six months.
- The risk of falling increases with age. More than half of seniors age 80 and older fall annually.
- 25 percent of seniors who break a hip from a fall die within six months.

But don’t let those depressing stats get you or your loved ones down. Steps can be taken to keep seniors safe from falls and other perils at home.

The most dangerous place in the house

No, it's not the kitchen. It's not even the stairways. And no, it's not the basement or garage or even the living room. Nearly 80 percent of falls by people 65 or older occur in the bathroom, according to the National Institute on Aging.
Why is the bathroom so dangerous? Rick Lauber, author of *The Successful Caregiver's Guide* and *Caregiver's Guide for Canadians* and a contributor in the popular *Chicken Soup for the Soul* book series, explains. “A bathroom often has wet flooring and other surfaces, and unsteady seniors are more prone to falling and injuring themselves.

Of course, there are measures that seniors or family members can take to reduce the risk. “Seniors and/or their caregivers can make bathrooms much safer for use by installing a walk-in bathtub, a shower seat, a handheld shower, a raised toilet seat, and (strategically placed) grab bars,” Lauber says.

Wanda E. Gozdz, a certified aging-in-place specialist, agrees with Lauber. Her key bathroom safety tip for caregivers of seniors: “Install balance (or grab) bars.” Registered nurse Sharon Roth Maguire, chief clinical quality officer for BrightStar Care, would add nonslip mats to her wish list for senior bathrooms.

Other bathroom safety tips include skid-proofing the tub, keeping a nightlight on in the bathroom, and keeping the water heater thermostat at no higher than 120 degrees F.
More dangers lurking in typical homes

But bathrooms don’t house all the dangers in the home. One other modification senior experts suggest is improved lighting in every room of the house. "As sight becomes limited, seniors can improve safety by increasing lighting in passageways and entryways,” Gozdz says. Her suggestion is simple: "Improve lighting by using LED lights at entrance ways and hallways."

Marlon Heimerl, a marketing manager at decorating/furnishings website Bellacor.com, expands on the need for better lighting. “The average 60-year-old needs at least three times more light compared to the average 20-year-old,” Heimerl says. “The solution is to help parents layer their lighting. Layering means to add one layer of ambient lighting, one layer of task lighting, and a third layer of accent lighting in each room. Ambient lighting is the foundation of the room's lighting; task lighting aims at making cooking, reading, or tasks easier; and accent lighting, while purely ornamental, can add beauty to a room. Together, they will create a safer home.”

Justin Lavelle, chief communications director of BeenVerified.com, writes often about protecting the elderly from financial and physical harm. He suggests paying special attention to the home’s living room.
“Make sure that you ‘senior proof’ the living area,” Lavelle says. “Make clear paths for canes and walkers, and reduce trip hazards such as decorative rugs.”

Kitchens also present hazards. The experts recommend rearranging pantries so that the most-used cans and boxes are easy to reach; the same goes for dishes, glasses and cups, and silverware. The objective: Make it unnecessary for a senior citizen to stand on a stool or chair to gain access to these items.

One other expert GoodCall® contacted has a different point of view – he’s a senior citizen himself. William Seavey, 70, lives in a mostly seniors community in Cambria, Calif. “My wife and I, because we run a bed & breakfast/Airbnb in our home, house other seniors on a regular basis, and I'm the go-to-person for troubleshooting problems that might threaten our clientele (and us).”

He says stairs present great danger to older people. “We have outside ones leading down to our rooms,” he says, noting that he takes extra precautions for visitors:

- The stairs are brightly lit at night and kept free of debris.
- There are handrails.
Finally, he says, “We tell people with disabilities about them and discourage them from coming if they cannot easily traverse a few stairs.”

His concern about stairs isn’t just for clients. “A flight of stairs within the home is problematic for us, as we have fallen a couple times when we don't use handrails and try to move too quickly,” Seavey says. “In this case, we have very plush carpet on them so the falls aren't catastrophic. Many in our community who live in two-story homes wished they had only a one-story home. It is possible to put in elevators or stair climbing mechanisms, but it is expensive.”

Lavelle echoes Seavey’s concerns about stairways and proposes other solutions. “There are a couple of options,” he says. “First, many companies provide stair lifts that move the person only or have a platform to move the person and wheelchair or walker. Another option is to set up the home so that all living can be done on one floor. Such as converting a room on the main floor to a bedroom, thus taking out the need to use the stairs with any regularity.”

The power of regular observation and communication
Dangers in a senior’s home aren’t always as obvious as stairs and bathrooms. “I still play tennis, and it's hard to believe that few accidents happen on the courts compared to at home,” Seavey says. “Homes are complicated, and I'm always on the lookout for something threatening.

Discussing the issues with seniors can help, particularly if an adult child isn’t positive his or her parents should continue living on their own,” says Terri Rasp, director of sales, analytics and training for Stonegate Senior Living LLC. “It’s important to ask questions and help your parent come to a decision on his or her own terms. For example, you might say, ‘Let’s talk about your car. How do you feel when you’re driving? Do you feel safe? Maybe we can get someone to drive you sometimes.’”

That’s often a good entry point about talking about the home. “As you get into the rhythm of talking about what’s really going on in your loved one’s day-to-day life, you can gradually lead up to a discussion about the long-term picture,” Rasp says.

But Seavey warns that children shouldn’t always trust the answers they get. “Seniors can be absentminded, prone to overestimating their abilities.”

Lavelle agrees, and he advises children to visit their elderly parents often. “Through regular checks you will know if the senior is eating
regularly, bathing regularly, and administering their medications as prescribed. If one of these starts to be missed with any regularity, it may be time to consider a move,” he says.

All that said, most seniors prefer to live on their own as long as possible. Following is a room-by-room checklist of ways to make a senior’s house safer:

**Bathroom**

- Walk-in shower
- Toilet seat – 17- to 20-inches high, which facilitates getting up.
- Good lighting
- Wide doorways
- Night light
- Grab bars on the walls of the shower/tub and on the sides of the tablet.
- Skid proof tub with a no-slip mat.
- Water heater set at 120 degrees F or lower.
- Door locks that open from both sides.

**Bedroom**

- Good lighting
- Wide doorways
• Remove throw rugs
• No cords in walkways
• Door locks that open from both sides
• Bed rail or transfer pole to help with getting out of bed.
• Slip-prevention footboards.

**Kitchen**

• Good lighting
• Wide doorways
• Only coffee pots with auto shut-off feature
• Store knives in a rack.
• Charged fire extinguisher handy.
• Cabinets with easy-to-operate handles – C or D shaped
• Store often-used tools and food within easy reach.

**Living Room**

• Good lighting
• Wide doorways
• No unnecessary or unwanted furniture
• No cords in walkways. Cordless phones and other devices are best.
• Skid-proof rugs
Other tips

- Good lighting
- Wide doorways
- Make sure stairs have railings.
- Regularly replace batteries in smoke detectors.
- Get a home security system.

Some of these modifications can be accomplished easily enough; others may require renovations for your home. It’s important when considering renovations to consult with experts who are certified aging-in-place specialists. These include remodelers, contractors, designers, architects, and health-care specialists all trained to help senior citizens remain comfortably in their homes as they age.

What certified aging-in-place specialists suggest

*GoodCall®* asked certified aging-in-place specialists for tips on renovating a house to make it safer for seniors. Unfortunately, Medicare doesn’t pay for such safety renovations, according to the American Association of Retired Persons. The organization suggests two potential sources of funding:
• Title 3 of the Older Americans Act provides home modification and repair funds distributed by organizations called area agencies on aging. This website can identify your local agency.

• Volunteer organization Rebuilding Together, through its local chapters, can help low-income senior citizens with home modifications.

We also asked the aging-in-place experts for lower-cost general safety tips, and we asked them to explain how a certified aging-in-place specialist can help.

Here’s their general advice, which could be modified according to a resident’s situation:

**Dean Shea**

*Sunny Brook Builders*

Title/certifications: National Association of Home Builders Certified Aging-In-Place Specialist, Graduate Remodeler and Green Builder

*Money-saving renovation tips*
• Remodeling is expensive and prices don’t go down, so getting the biggest bang for your buck is important. Consulting with a Certified Aging-In-Place specialist before you finalize your remodeling plans can help you add low- or no-cost solutions to current and future needs. For example, if you may want a grab bar in the future, put blocking in place now at low to no additional cost when you are replacing the tub surround. Installing new light switches and outlets at universal design heights adds no cost. Replacing interior doors with wider doors costs less if you are already reconfiguring space and doing drywall and trim work.

• One sure way to get your money’s worth with any remodeling project is to do it sooner than later. The longer you have to live with the improvement, the more use and enjoyment it will bring. The utility of many projects goes way beyond aging in place with impacts to all from the person with groceries in hand, the child who has a weaker grip, the delivery person bringing in furniture or appliances, the mom or dad with a stroller or the dog with bad joints. The sooner you plan for potential projects, get bids, prioritize and contract for specific projects, the sooner that
you will begin enjoying the results and the less expensive they will be over time.

**Tips for improving home safety**

- Having stairs in good condition with appropriate dimensions to meet code and the right kind of handrails could be the difference between enjoying life in your home for another decade or declining health in a nursing home. Stairs should be consistent because the brain expects each step to be the same. Handrails must meet the graspability requirements so when you climb or descend stairs or you fall, you can easily grasp the railing to stop or mitigate a fall.
- Boilers, furnaces, water heaters, stoves, ovens, dryers and fireplaces using gas, oil or solid fuels can be a cause of illness and death in the home. Have a professional check for gas leaks, spillage of combustion products, and the condition and location of vents and chimneys. Test, replace, or install smoke and carbon monoxide detectors.

**How certified aging-in-place specialists can help**

Thinking about the future for aging in place is just another layer of detail when planning for any homebuilding or remodeling project, but it often gets left out because a builder or designer
does not have training or experience in these areas. Both universal design elements and aging in place considerations are less expensive to incorporate in original construction than to change later by remodeling. Engaging a certified aging-in-place specialist in the design phase of the project gets these considerations and costs on the table before budgets are finalized, allowing cost-effective items to be incorporated before construction begins.

**Shani Abrams & Jane Berlow**

*Shani & Jane re-Design*

Title/certifications: re-Designers/Home Stagers/CAPS Aging-in-Place Specialist

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**Money-saving renovation tips:**

- Have home safety assessment done to identify changes.
- Replace door knobs with lever handles.
- Install rocker switches in place of traditional light switches.
• Improve lighting throughout the house.
• Replace traditional door hinges with offset swing hinges on doors.
• Reorganize your kitchen so heavy objects are in lower cabinets.
• Install roll-out shelves in kitchen.

**Tips for improving home safety:**

• Make sure address plate is large and properly illuminated.
• Doorbell should be easy to see and reach.
• All steps should have sturdy, easy-to-grasp handrails.
• Make sure all throw rugs are securely attached to floor.
• Install secure grab bars in shower. Attractive ones are available.
• Keep flashlight within reach of bed in case of power outage.

**How certified aging-in-place specialists can help**

Certified aging-in-place specialists provide expertise and knowledge for those people who want to achieve their goal of living in their current home safely and successfully. Aging in place allows people to grow old gracefully in a home that will support their ongoing and changing needs.
Money-saving renovation tips

- Purchase items with dual purpose such as a grab bar that can be used as a towel bar.
- Use a contractor to build larger items such as a ramp versus purchasing them from a medical supply company that doesn’t manufacture these items.
- Work with an occupational therapist to determine actual needs based on personal situations/conditions. (There will be an initial cost for the assessment.)
• Plan ahead so you won’t have to make more expensive changes in the future.
• Tape rugs to the floor to make them nonskid.

**Tips for improving home safety**

• Remove throw rugs and purchase nonskid mats for areas by sinks and showers/tubs.
• Use bright/contrasting tape between doorway thresholds and on steps.
• Place most frequently used items in easy-to-reach places.
• Use fluorescent night lights in hallways and bathrooms.
• Set water heater thermostat lower than 120 degrees to prevent burns.

**How certified aging-in-place specialists can help**

• Determining the senior’s individualized needs.
• Providing recommendations for environmental/home modifications.
• Enabling individuals to live a safe and fulfilling life in the place of their choice.
So you’re thinking about getting your floors redone in your home and some plumbing needs to be looked at for leaks. So you’re thinking about building a new house for your family of four and possible grandparents when they might need to move. So you’re older now – you feel the arthritis in your joints, the slower reaction times and weakness, and you find it harder to see things in the house.

The best approach to all these scenarios is to get a certified-aging-in-place specialist – or CAPS – to help you get the best plan going for your future to live with safety and comfort in your home. That’s what their specialty is all about. CAPS understand human development from infant to geriatric, environmental concerns, specific diseases, and how it affects function, conditions associated with aging such as limited range of motion, vision and muscle strength loss and balance issues. These are all tabulated in with the other needs of other family members and
additions of members coming up with a design plan that encompasses comfort and safety in a living, growing home for life.

The specialist also knows people want safety without looking institutional and knows the products on the market and often works with the contractor or remodeler to get it done correctly the first time.

Tips to think of are no steps or curbs/lips at door entries, allowing family and neighbors to enter your home.

**Conclusion**

Nothing’s foolproof, of course. Living is inherently dangerous for everyone. But taking precautions such as those mentioned in this guide can mean you won’t have to worry *every second of every day* about your future or the future of a senior close to you.