

# The AARP Home Fit Guide

Information and Tips to Keep  
Your Home in Top Form for  
Comfort, Safety, and Livability



HEALTH / FINANCES / CONNECTING / GIVING / ENJOYING

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# Introduction

We love our homes. It doesn't matter if you own your home or rent, live in a small studio apartment or a grand mansion, chances are your home means more to you than just the place where you live, keep your clothes, or receive your mail. Our homes provide us shelter and much, much more. Whatever their size, they are our castles—the site of cherished memories and life experiences, our place of refuge where we can be ourselves, relax, raise a family, or plant a garden.

For older Americans, their home can provide a sense of comfort, security, and independence. It figures prominently in their quality of life and it can also influence their physical independence and ability to participate in community activities. And, for the approximately 80 percent of Americans age 50 and older who own their home, it can provide wealth which they can use for a variety of purposes such as serving as collateral for the upgrade and repair of the property, providing economic security for unforeseen expenses such as long-term care, or financing to future generations through inheritance.

Eighty-nine percent of older Americans have told AARP they want to remain in their home and community for as long as possible. AARP is committed to helping them do that. Therefore, AARP is pleased to bring you a collection of home-related information and tips that can help you keep your home, in top form for comfort, safety and livability.

We hope you find this information helpful. However, please know that the suggestions contained in this guide vary from simple tasks to more complicated projects that may require professional help. If you are at all unsure of the level of skill needed or are uncomfortable about the amount of physical effort a project could take, then it is best to call in a professional. However, before you hire someone, follow our seven steps to hiring a contractor, located at the back of this booklet.



MELANIE ROBERTS



# Home Livability

Where do you want to spend your later years? Chances are you want to stay in your current home for as long as possible. Is your home currently right for you and, if so, will it continue to match your needs and abilities as you age? Think about it.

## Appropriate Housing

Everyone wants to live in a home that is appropriate and fits his or her needs and abilities. Unfortunately, most people don't discuss or think about the appropriateness of their home until a crisis occurs and it becomes obvious that they are living in a place that no longer meets their needs and abilities.

Most houses and apartments are designed for young, able-bodied adults and do not accommodate the needs of older residents or people with disabilities. Think of the steps in front of many houses. They are an inconvenience to a parent pushing a stroller, but to those with disabilities or someone who is older, they can be a barrier to living safely and independently. A well-designed home, or one that has been modified to accommodate the needs of residents of all ages and abilities, can promote independence and the satisfaction of staying in control and in your home as you age.

## Assessing Your Home for Livability

Your home is more than your physical surroundings. It is the center of activities unique to your interests and routines. Occupational therapy practitioners are the professionals you can hire who can assess the fit between individuals and their environments so they can continue to participate in daily life activities that are important to them. Occupational therapy practitioners play a key role in identifying strategies that enable individuals to modify their homes to meet these needs.

### What Does an Occupational Therapy Assessment Entail?

Once an occupational therapy practitioner is included in your home assessment, you can



expect to be asked about what you do each day and what your goals are for the future.

- Are you a gourmet chef? Or are you looking to simplify your cooking activities?
- Is your favorite feature of your home the yard and garden? Or is it the recreation room in the basement?
- Do you need office space to work on all those volunteer projects you've taken on since retirement? Or, do wish you had a playroom for the grandchildren?
- Are you avoiding any activities that you used to do because they are difficult or you are worried about safety?

Occupational therapy practitioners are also concerned about conditions you might have and how they impact your ability to participate in the activities you have discussed together. The interview may therefore include questions such as these:

- Does arthritis make certain activities painful or difficult?
- Have limitations in vision forced you to give up or curtail certain detail work?
- Are you experiencing balance issues or shortness of breath when climbing the stairs?

You may be asked to perform specific tasks that can help determine the nature of the difficulty you are experiencing when engaged in them.



BLAKE LITTLE

### **How Does an Occupational Therapy Assessment Help Me?**

From the information gathered, the occupational therapy practitioner will make recommendations to adapt your environment so that you can safely, comfortably, and successfully do the things you want to do. Possible occupational therapy recommendations might be:

- Adding grab bars, a handheld shower, and tub bench to increase safety in bathing.
- Creating raised flowerbeds for better access when gardening.
- Purchasing a standing combination lamp/magnifier to install by your easy chair for doing crossword puzzles or needlework.

## Universal Design

Another way to make a house appropriate for all residents is to incorporate universal design features into a home during the building stage or by modifying or changing an existing house. Universal design is about creating a home for everyone, regardless of age, size, or ability. Universal design features and products make a home safer and more comfortable for a wide range of people. And, as the name implies, universal design fits everyone and every lifestyle including:

- Families with young children.
- Older adults who want to stay in their home as they grow older.
- People who are taller or shorter than average.
- People who have limited mobility or dexterity.
- People with a permanent or temporary disability.

### Universal Design Features

Universal design features are those components of a home that work well for all residents, regardless of age or ability, and any guests who may visit. They just make good sense. Having universal design features and products in a home prevents accidents, increases comfort and safety, and enhances residents' independence. Essential universal design features include:

- At least one no-step entry to the house either through the front, back, or garage door.
- Entryway doors that are 36 inches wide, interior doors 34-36 inches wide and passageways 42 inches wide to allow for ample room to pass through.
- Light controls, electrical outlets, and thermostats that are easily reachable for a person in a wheelchair.
- A three-foot wide corridor, free of hazards and steps that connects all rooms on the main floor.
- Lever-style door handles and faucets that don't require grasping or twisting to operate.



- A bedroom, kitchen, entertainment area, and a full bathroom, with plenty of space for maneuverability, on the main floor.
- Reinforced bathroom walls for the option of adding grab bars.

In addition to those listed, there are many other universal design features and products that many people, especially those over 50, like and incorporate into their homes. They include:

- Raised front-loading clothes washer, dryer, and dishwasher;
- Side-by-side refrigerator;
- Easy-access kitchen storage (pull-out shelves, adjustable height cupboards, lazy susans);
- Low or no-threshold stall shower with built-in bench or seat;
- Non-slip floors, bathtubs, and showers;
- Raised, comfort-level toilets;
- Multi-level kitchen countertops with open space underneath so one can work while seated;
- Windows that require minimal effort to open and close;
- Covered entryway or porch to protect you from rain and snow;
- Rocker-style light switches;
- Task lighting directed to a specific surface or area that provides illumination for specific tasks; and
- Easy-to-grasp cabinet knobs or pulls.



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## Home Livability Evaluation Checklist

Now that you've had the chance to think about your home, evaluate its livability, ask yourself the questions that follow and decide if your home meets your current and future livability requirements. Your answers will let you know if you need to make changes or if you should search for a more suitable home.

- Is there at least one step-free entrance into the home?
- Are there a bedroom, full bath, and kitchen facilities on one level, which are barrier free?
- Are the doorways and hallways wide enough to let a wheelchair pass through?
- Do doorknobs and faucets have lever handles, which are easier to use than rounded knobs?
- Are kitchen countertops mounted at varying heights so they can be used while standing or seated?
- Can kitchen and bathroom cabinets and shelves be easily reached?
- Do the bathtub and/or shower have a non-slip surface?
- Are there grab bars in the bathroom or has the wall been reinforced so that you can add them?
- Are hallways and staircases well lit?
- Are there secure handrails on both sides of stairways?
- Can light switches, electrical outlets, and thermostats be easily reached even when seated?
- Can the windows be opened with minimum effort?



If you would like a more complete assessment of your home for livability, enlist the help of an occupational therapist to aid you in identifying ways to improve safety in your home and ways you can modify your home to help compensate for any disability you may be experiencing.

# Home Safety

## Home Safety and Falls

Among people 65 years and older, falls are the leading cause of injury deaths and the most common cause of nonfatal injuries and hospital admissions for trauma. Each year in the United States, nearly one-third of older adults experience a fall.

The majority, 55 percent, of fall injuries among older people occurs inside the home and an additional 23 percent happen outside, but near the house. Many of these falls, and the resulting injuries, can be prevented by taking steps to eliminate or fix potential hazards in and around the home.

## Home Safety Checklist

Conducting a home safety check can go a long way in helping prevent problems that could lead to a fall, other injury, or loss of independence. Our checklist can help you spot safety problems that may be present in your home. Spend some time walking through your home checking for possible hazards. Then answer the questions below and review the recommendations that are listed. If you find any problems, take action to correct any hazards you may find and create a safer home environment for you, your family, and your guests.

### Entrances and Exits

#### Questions to ask:

- Are exterior pathways, porches and doorways well lit?
- Are the walkways in good condition?
- Are there handrails on both sides of the steps?
- Are there scatter or throw rugs near the doorways that may cause tripping or slipping?
- Does the door have a security peephole or view panel at the correct height?
- Is the door threshold visible or does it contribute to trips or falls?
- Is the door easy to open?

### Recommendations:

- Increase lighting along pathways and entryways.
- Install floodlights with motion sensors.
- Install photoelectric “eyes” in light fixtures so lighting will turn on automatically at dusk.
- Repair any holes, loose bricks, or uneven areas of pathways.
- Install handrails on both sides of steps.
- Install lever door handles, which are easier to use than knobs. However, remember young children can also operate lever handles so you may want to keep doors locked when they are in the house.
- Remove all scatter or throw rugs throughout the house.
- Install peepholes on exterior doors at a height right for you.
- Install a beveled, no step, no trip threshold. A contrasting color will make it easily visible for added safety.
- Install a bench beside the door to hold packages while you are opening the door.

### Steps and Stairways

#### Questions to ask:

- Are they in good repair?
- Is carpeting worn, torn or loose?
- Are there secure handrails on both sides of stairways?
- Are there light switches at both the top and bottom of indoor stairs?
- Are the stairs well lighted?
- Is there any clutter on the stairs?
- Can you clearly see the edges of the steps?



**Recommendations:**

- Replace or remove any worn, torn, or loose carpeting. Be sure to choose a carpet pattern that doesn't hide step edges, making it look like steps have ended when they haven't.
- Make sure no nail heads are sticking out.
- Install handrails on both sides of stairs at a height right for you.
- Consider refinishing or replacing worn stair treads.
- Install light switches at top and bottom of stairs.
- Use the highest wattage lightbulb approved for overhead or nearby light fixture that does not produce excessive glare.
- Install night-lights in nearby outlets.
- Remove all objects from stairway.
- Paint edge of step with contrasting color if vision is impaired.
- Add non-slip adhesive strips to uncarpeted stair treads.

**Bathroom****Questions to ask:**

- Are the sink, bathtub and shower faucets easy to use?
- Is the bathtub and/or shower floor slippery?
- Do bathmats outside the tub have rubber backing and lie flat?
- Are there grab bars in the bathtub, shower, and toilet areas?
- Is a low toilet seat making it hard to stand up?
- Are there exposed hot water pipes beneath the sink?
- Is there a handheld or adjustable height showerhead?
- Is there a bath seat in bathtub or shower?
- Is the hot water heater set at 120° or lower?
- Are there small electrical appliances including hair dryers, curling irons, shavers, etc., plugged in when not in use?
- Is there good lighting?



**Recommendations:**

- Install lever handles on sink, bathtub and shower faucets.
- Use non-skid mats or non-slip strips on bathtub and shower floors.
- To prevent tripping or slipping on bathroom rugs or mats, use only rubber-backed rugs or mats that stay firmly in place or secure them with double-sided rug tape or rubber carpet mesh.
- Install grab bars (preferably two) in bathtub and shower and at toilet.
- Install a toilet seat extender or higher comfort height toilet.
- Insulate hot water pipes underneath the sink.
- Install a handheld or adjustable showerhead.
- Install a bath seat or bench in bathtub or shower.
- Set the water heater to 120° to avoid scalding.
- Install highest wattage bulb allowed for fixture that does not cause excessive glare.
- Install night-light and/or replace light switch with glow switch that can be seen in the dark.
- Unplug all electrical appliances when not in use and never use any appliance near a filled sink or bathtub.



**Kitchen**

**Questions to ask:**

- Is there good lighting over the sink, stove, and countertop work areas?
- Are cabinets and cupboards easy to open?
- Are stove controls easily reached? Does your hand come close to the flame or electric coils?
- Is a fire extinguisher within easy reach?

- Do you have a sturdy step stool?
- Are objects on shelves or in drawers easily accessible?
- Does the sink have an anti-scald device?
- Is there a countertop work area that can be used while seated?
- Do you use wax on the floor?

**Recommendations:**

- Increase task lighting at sink, stove, and work areas and use highest wattage bulb approved for all fixtures.
- Install C or D-type handles on cabinets and cupboards.
- If there are no young children in the house and you are replacing your stove, consider purchasing one with controls at the front.
- Add touch and color-contrasted controls for those with low vision.
- Mount an ABC-rated fire extinguisher in an easy to reach place.
- Only use step stools that have non-slip steps and grip handle.
- Install adjustable, pull-down shelving to increase safe access to upper cabinets.
- Install pullout shelves under counters and corner lazy susans.
- Install a pressure-balanced, temperature-regulated faucet and keep it at 120° or less.
- Create countertop work space with knee clearance by removing cabinet doors or shelves so you can work while seated.
- Avoid using floor wax and don't walk on just cleaned floors until they have completely dried.



**Living Room, Dining Room, and Bedroom**

**Questions to ask:**

- Are all passageways clear and well lit?
- Are any electrical or telephone cords exposed along pathways?

- Are rugs or carpets secured to floor? Are there any scatter or throw rugs?
- Is there ample light in all areas?
- Are there smoke and carbon monoxide detectors on each floor of the house? Are they near bedrooms?
- Is the telephone easily accessible from bed?
- Are closets well lit and easy to use?
- Are light switches easy to use?



**Recommendations:**

- Rearrange furniture to allow for clear, wide passageways.
- Use natural light to the fullest by opening curtains, blinds, and shades during daylight hours.
- Use highest wattage lightbulb for fixture.
- Place all cords along a wall where they can't cause tripping.
- Remove cords from under furniture or carpeting to prevent fraying and possible fire.
- Use double-sided tape to secure all rugs. Remove all scatter and throw rugs.
- Install telephone jack or cordless phone close to favorite chair and bed to improve accessibility.
- Install touch control lamp or clapper device that turns things on and off.
- Install smoke and carbon monoxide alarms on every floor.
- Make sure alarms can be heard in every bedroom.
- Install a closet light and adjustable rods and shelves in closet.

**Exterior**

**Questions to ask:**

- Is there any broken or uneven pavement on walkways or the driveway?
- Are any shrub or tree roots sticking out of the ground?
- Is there adequate lighting to get in and out of all entrances and exits including the garage?
- Are there handrails on both sides of outdoor steps?

**Recommendations:**

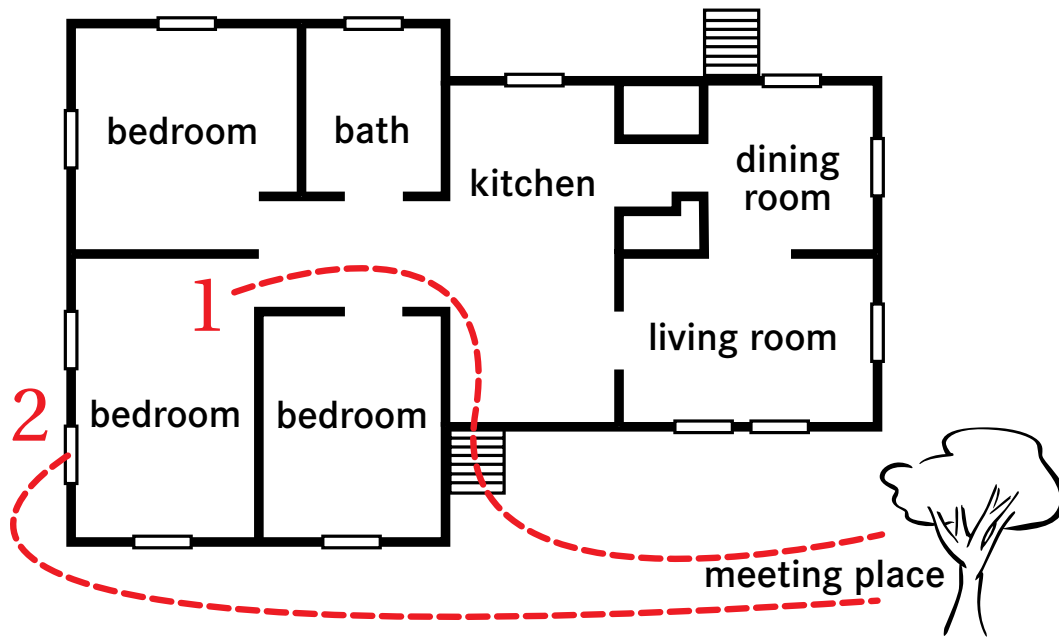
- Repair any broken or uneven pavement on all walkways and the driveway.
- Remove any shrub or tree roots that could be tripped over.
- Install bright lighting at all entrances and exits. If glare is an issue, choose bulbs that produce less glare. Consider flood-lights with a motion sensor and/or photoelectric “eyes” in light fixtures.
- Install handrails on both sides of all steps for greater safety.

## Getting Started on Making Your Home Safer and More Comfortable

Sometimes it is difficult to know where to begin to create a safer home when there are so many things you should do. The best way is to start simply. There are many changes you can make to your home, many at little or no cost, which can greatly increase its comfort and safety. Our ten favorites are included here. And, most of the products needed for these modifications can be purchased at your local hardware store.

1. Install handrails on both sides of all steps (inside and outside);
2. Secure all carpets and area rugs with double-sided tape;
3. Install easy to grasp shaped handles for all drawers and cabinet doors;
4. Use brighter bulbs that do not produce excessive glare in all settings;
5. Install night-lights in all areas of night activity;
6. Add reflective, non-slip tape on all non-carpeted stairs;
7. Install lever handles on all doors;
8. Place a bench near entrances for setting down purchases and resting;
9. Install closet lights, as well as adjustable, pull-down rods and shelves; and
10. Install rocker light switches; consider illuminated ones in select areas.





## Home Emergency Exit Plan

Emergencies, such as fires, can happen unexpectedly. Everyone, whether you live alone or in a house full of people, in an apartment or in a house, needs to have an emergency exit plan in place so everyone can evacuate the home quickly. In developing a home emergency exit plan, you should:

- Investigate all possible exits and escape routes and develop a plan for all levels of the home and all bedrooms.
- Make sure all family members, including young children and grandchildren, know the details of the plan.
- Select an agreed upon meeting place, such as a neighbor's house, mailbox, streetlight, or other location outside and away from the home where everyone can meet after exiting.
- Once the plan is in place, practice it every six months to make sure everyone can exit the home quickly and safely.

# Home Maintenance

## Your Home Is Your Greatest Asset—Take Care Of It!

In addition to providing shelter, comfort, and safety, a home is often an older person's largest asset. Proper care of your home will not only protect your investment, it will help you avoid major problems and repairs down the road. Remember, home repair problems will only get bigger if not attended to. When it comes to your home, protect it—don't neglect it!

If you don't have the time, skill, or physical endurance to do everything on your list, consider getting help. If you need professional services, ask friends and neighbors for referrals. Get two or three estimates before you hire someone and make sure the person or company is licensed and insured.

## Seasonal Tasks Around the House

There are many things you can do throughout the year to prepare your house for each season. Using the checklist below will help you keep your house safe and sound all year long.

### Spring

- Clean windows.
- Replace storm windows with screens.
- Change batteries in smoke detectors.
- Inspect house for fire hazards, such as overloaded extension cords.
- Check or install carbon monoxide detectors.
- Make sure all exits, hallways, and stairs are clear.
- Clean gutters, yard, driveways, patios, porches, decks, and walkways.
- Clean out garage, shed, or carport.
- Clean basement and attic.
- Clean your clothes dryer's vent system. Lint buildup can cause the dryer to run longer to dry your clothes, using energy need-



lessly. Lint buildup in the vent can lead to a fire.

- Make sure all indoor and outdoor stairs are slip proof, well lit, and in good condition.
- Fix broken or uneven pavement on stairs, walkways, patios, or driveways.
- Have someone inspect the roof for leaks, loose shingles, or debris.
- Check indoors and outside for signs of pests, such as termites or rodents. Call a professional if you suspect activity.
- Fix broken doors, gates, or fences.

### **Summer**

- Mow the lawn and trim the bushes.
- Have an arborist remove weak, dead, or rotten trees or large branches that may fall on the house.
- Install window air conditioners or have central air system inspected.
- Check all door locks and doorknobs to be sure they're in good working order.
- Install deadbolts on doors, if you don't have them.
- Check the home security system or consider installing one.
- Check screens in doors and windows and repair or replace as needed.
- Check all outside lights and replace bulbs as needed.
- Clean outdoor lawn furniture and grill.
- Check garden hoses for leaks and replace as necessary.

### **Fall**

- Rake leaves.
- Clean and inspect gutters, downspouts, and eaves.
- Weatherize house for winter—including attic and basement—with insulation, weather stripping, caulk, plaster, or replacement windows.
- Check and clean furnace and replace air filters.
- Store lawn furniture, hoses, planters, grills and other outdoor

items for winter.

- Buy and store salt, sand, snow shovel, and snow blower.
- Drain outdoor water faucets and irrigation pumps.
- Clean your clothes dryer's vent system. Lint buildup can cause the dryer to run longer to dry your clothes, using energy needlessly. Lint buildup in the vent can lead to a fire.
- Create and store an emergency survival kit for bad weather. Include batteries, candles, water, and canned or packaged food that won't spoil.
- Inspect and clean fireplace and stock up on firewood. Hire a chimney sweep if you haven't had your chimney flue cleaned in a while or if you regularly use your fireplace or wood stove.
- Change screens to storm windows and remove and clean window air-conditioning units.
- Fill oil or propane tanks.
- Keep walkways, pathways, and driveways clear of leaves and debris.
- Change batteries in smoke detectors.

### Winter

- Keep walkways and driveways clear of snow and ice.
- Put a blanket, shovel, sand, and first aid kit in your car.
- Stock up on canned goods and household items, including lightbulbs and batteries. (Buy compact fluorescent lightbulbs (CFLs). They are more energy efficient and will last a lot longer.)
- Check for proper lighting inside and outside the house.
- Check all holiday lights inside and outside the house and make sure they are in good working order.
- Make sure space heaters work properly and never leave them on unattended. Be sure not to place them too close to furniture or draperies.
- Check sinks, tubs, and toilets for leaks in the faucet or tank.



# Home Energy Tips

## Free and Easy Ways to Cut Your Energy Bill

With energy bills on the rise, everyone is looking for ways to cut back on energy consumption. Here are some easy and free things anyone can do to help cut energy costs:

- In winter, open drapes, blinds, or shades on south-facing windows and let the sun warm your rooms.** Close them at sundown so they help insulate. Remember clean windows maximize solar gain.
- In summer, close drapes, blinds, or shades on east- and west-facing windows.** Once the sun goes down, open the windows to let the cooler night air in, but remember to close and lock ground floor windows before retiring.
- Shut fireplace dampers** to prevent heated air from going up the chimney when the fireplace is not in use. This will stop the loss of warm air up the chimney all year long. Be sure all embers are out before closing the damper after burning a fire.
- Remove window air-conditioning units when the summer is over** to prevent heat from escaping. If the unit can't be moved, put a cover over it to prevent drafts.
- Turn off lights in unoccupied rooms** and kitchen and bathroom ventilating fans after they've done their job. Ventilating fans can quickly blow out a house full of heated or cooled air if left on.
- Place your favorite chair or sofa away from an exterior wall or window so you aren't sitting in a draft.
- Cut your shower time in half** and lower the temperature on your water heater to 120° to reduce water heating costs.
- Take short showers instead of baths.** They use less water so your water heater won't have to work so hard.
- Run your clothes and dishwashers only when you have a full load.** Use the cold water setting of your clothes washer when possible and be sure to clean the clothes dryer's lint



filter after every load.

- Clean the lint filter in your clothes dryer after every load** and periodically clean your dryer's vent system. Lint buildup can cause the dryer to run longer to dry your clothes, which wastes energy and lint in the vent can lead to a fire.
- Clean registers, baseboard heaters, and radiators** and make sure they are not blocked by curtains, furniture, or carpeting.
- Turn off lights in unoccupied rooms.**
- When not in use, unplug block-type chargers** (such as phone, flashlight, small appliance, and toy chargers).
- Lower your thermostat at night** and sleep under extra blankets or a comforter during cooler months.
- If you have ceiling fans, turn the fan on low in the opposite direction to recirculate the air**, remembering that warm air rises and cold air sinks.
- Use heat-generating appliances—washers, dryers, or ovens—during the morning or evening when it's cooler.** This reduces the load on your air conditioner in the summer and helps heat the house in the winter.
- Instead of using your dishwasher's drying cycle, **air dry washed dishes and pots and pans.**



## Energy Efficiency Projects That Save You Money

Everyone wants to lower their utility bill. By following just a few of the tips below, you can make your home more comfortable and easier to heat and cool—while saving money.

- Install weather stripping or caulk around doors and windows** and place foam gaskets behind outlet plate covers on exterior walls. If there is a gap at the bottom of the door, install a door sweep or door shoe gasket.
- Insulate the ceiling and attic** for savings on both heating and cooling costs. Attic insulation is a primary way to maximize heating efficiency. New plastic-wrapped fiberglass batts slip easily into place and eliminate scratchy surfaces.

- Install a programmable thermostat** to change the set point for the times when you are regularly away from home or are asleep.
- Seal and insulate ducts.** Ducts running through unfinished spaces (attics, crawl spaces, and garages) that are not properly sealed and insulated can waste energy used to heat and cool the home. Seal the joints with a non-hardening sealant and insulate the ducts. Also, seal the gaps around pipes that connect to the house from the outside with expanding foam, which comes in convenient aerosol cans.
- Wrap your hot water heater**, especially older models that don't have much insulation, with an insulation blanket or jacket made specifically for this purpose. (Note: Blankets aren't recommended for gas heaters and those with automatic vent dampers. Check with your heater's manufacturer to see if your unit can be wrapped.) Reduce your water heating expenses further by installing low flow shower heads and faucets.
- Install glass doors on your fireplace opening.** They can prevent embers and ash from flying free and warm air from escaping.
- Remove window air-conditioning units before cold weather to prevent heat from escaping** through and around the unit. If the unit can't be removed, put a cover over it to prevent drafts and make sure there are no openings where cold air can seep in.
- Replace or clean furnace air filters once a month** or according to manufacturers instructions. A clogged, dirty filter blocks air flow and forces your furnace to work harder and raises your energy bill.
- Clean warm air registers, baseboard heaters and radiators** several times a year.
- Check the heating system.** Call a professional to clean and tune your furnace once a year.
- If you have radiators, place a heat-resistant reflector between



the radiator and outside wall.

- Replace incandescent lightbulbs, especially in high-use areas, with Energy Star® compact fluorescent lightbulbs (CFLs).** While they cost more, compact fluorescent bulbs use much less energy than incandescent bulbs and last a lot longer and are better for the environment.
- Install white shades or blinds on windows** to reflect heat away from the house if you live in a warm climate.
- If there isn't enough roof overhang to shield windows from direct sun, **consider installing awnings over west and south-facing windows.** They will not only block solar heat, but will also protect furnishings from UV damage.
- Install a motion detector or photocell unit** on exterior porch or flood lights so they will only turn on when needed and will turn off during the day automatically.
- Ask your utility company to do an energy audit.** Cost for an audit varies but some companies offer free audits for low-income families.

# Getting Help

## Certified Aging-in-Place Specialists (CAPS)

The National Association of Home Builders Remodelers (NAHB), in collaboration with the NAHB Research Center, NAHB Seniors Housing Council and AARP, developed the Certified Aging-in-Place Specialist (CAPS) program to address the needs of consumers who want to make their house a home for a lifetime—regardless of one’s age or abilities.

A certified aging-in-place specialist is specially trained in:

- The unique needs of older people;
- Home modifications that can help people continue living independently in their homes longer;
- Common remodeling projects; and
- Solutions to common barriers.

CAPS professionals have been taught the strategies and techniques for designing and building aesthetically pleasing, barrier-free living environments. The CAPS program goes beyond design to address the codes and standards, common remodeling projects and their costs, product ideas and resources needed to provide comprehensive and practical aging-in-place solutions.

To find a CAPS professional in your area, go online to [www.nahb.org/caps](http://www.nahb.org/caps).

## Finding an Occupational Therapist

Physicians, case managers, and other medical professionals can refer you to occupational therapy practitioners in your area. Other sources for locating occupational therapists that specialize in home modifications include your local home builders association as well as colleagues, family members, and friends who have received occupational therapy services.

All occupational therapy practitioners are qualified to work in home modification, however, many who specialize in this area have obtained specialty certification through the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) or have the CAPS designation.

To find out more about occupational therapists and home modi-

fications, go online to [www.aota.org/Consumers/WhatisOT/FactSheets/Home/39470.aspx](http://www.aota.org/Consumers/WhatisOT/FactSheets/Home/39470.aspx).

## Seven Steps to Hiring a Contractor

Finding the right skilled help for a modification or repair project requires more than just opening the Yellow Pages or surfing the Internet. Unfortunately, there are bogus home repair contractors and handymen who will take your money and run. So, before hiring a contractor, do your homework and check them out. Here's what you need to do before hiring someone:

### 1. List the things you want to have done.

Before you talk to a contractor, think carefully about the changes you want to make to your home. Write down exactly what you want the contractor to do.

### 2. Get recommendations from family and friends.

Talk with family, friends and neighbors who have used contractors. Find out if they were satisfied with the work, the price, and the time it took to complete the job. Ask if they would use that contractor again. Local hardware and home improvement stores can often make recommendations or give you the name of someone they respect.

Beware of the stranger that shows up at your house unannounced and says he can give you a good price because he has leftover materials from another job. This is rarely a good choice and could be a scam.

### 3. Check out the recommendations.

Once you have a list of names, do some research on them. The Better Business Bureau and Consumer Protection Office can help you find out if there have been any complaints filed against a contractor or their company. It is also a good idea to see if the contractor you are interested in is licensed in your state. Although licensing doesn't guarantee reliability, it's a minimum qualification a contractor should have.

### 4. Compare contractors.

Make sure the contractor does the kind of work you are interested in and find out how long they have been in business. Ask for proof that they are licensed, bonded, and covered by workman's compensation and liability insurance. Get references and check them out to make sure they are financially sound.

**5. Get estimates.**

Meet with at least three contractors to discuss the job you want done and your budget. Estimates should detail the materials to be used, the labor charges, the start and end dates, and the total cost.

**6. Put everything in writing.**

A well written, clear, and detailed contract is very important. Make sure that everything you agreed to is in writing. Don't approve any plans unless you understand them. Never sign a contract with any blanks and get a copy of everything you sign. Take your time to make a decision and remember, genuinely good deals will still be there tomorrow. Get a second opinion before you sign.

You can cancel a contract by sending a letter to the contractor within three business days, if the contract was signed in your home or somewhere other than the contractor's permanent place of business.

**7. Don't pay the final bill until all the work is complete.**

Don't make your final payment until all the work is complete and you and any necessary local building authorities have inspected the work. Also, before you pay, get a written statement that the contractor has paid all of the subcontractors and suppliers.



# Resources

AARP offers publications with information and resources on home design and modification, home and community livability, falls prevention, and the Fair Housing Act. Some publications are available in Spanish. For more information or to order, go to [www.aarp.org/families/home\\_design/universaldesign/home\\_and\\_community\\_booklets\\_online\\_order\\_form.html](http://www.aarp.org/families/home_design/universaldesign/home_and_community_booklets_online_order_form.html).

The **AARP website**, [www.aarp.org](http://www.aarp.org), also provides information on home design and home modification at [www.aarp.org/homedesign](http://www.aarp.org/homedesign). Information to help you with financing home improvements is available at [www.aarp.org/money/wise\\_consumer/financinghomes/a2002-09-30-HomeLoansTheBasics.html](http://www.aarp.org/money/wise_consumer/financinghomes/a2002-09-30-HomeLoansTheBasics.html).

The **American Occupational Therapy Association, Inc.** has tips for living including information on aging-in-place, home modification, and falls prevention. Go to [www.aota.org/Consumers/Tips/Adults.aspx](http://www.aota.org/Consumers/Tips/Adults.aspx).

The **National Association of Home Builders** has information on how to select a home remodeler who is trained in making modifications appropriate for older residents. To find a certified aging-in-place specialist (CAPS) in your area, go to [www.nahb.org/caps](http://www.nahb.org/caps).

The **Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University** provides information and resources, including publications that address common universal design questions. For more information, visit [www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/](http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/).

**AARP Housing Options**  
**Outreach & Service/Livable Communities**  
601 E Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20049  
1-888-OUR AARP (1-888-687-2277)  
[www.aarp.org/housing](http://www.aarp.org/housing)

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