

## The Alzheimer - Friendly Home

Easing Caregiver Stress While Enhancing The Care Recipient's  
Independence And Safety  
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**Benefits of an Alzheimer-friendly home.** Caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's disease (AD) can be a rewarding yet highly stressful endeavor. Changes in a loved one's behavior, mood, and judgment can turn an ordinary home into an unsafe environment. Simple tasks, such as bathing or cooking, can become frustrating and dangerous activities. Research shows, however, that when homes are adapted to meet the special needs of persons with AD, independence and well-being are improved. This guide, written by a caregiver of someone with AD, contains a wide range of successful interventions used by the author and by other caregivers in similar situations. These interventions can have a tremendous impact on the quality of life for a person with AD and make your caregiving task easier.

**Making changes over time.** AD manifests differently in each person, and because those behaviors change over time, it is important to choose the solutions that suit your loved one's current needs. For example, in the early stages of the disease, cooking safety may start with a "Turn Off The Stove" sign. As the disease progresses, assistance and supervision are needed to complete tasks. In the mid-to-late stages, you may need to deny access to the stove or kitchen when you are not present.

**Making changes according to personal needs.** Removing the bathroom lock allows you easy access during an emergency, but if your loved one values privacy and control, installing a new lock that can be opened from both inside *and* outside the bathroom is a better solution.

**Learning from other caregivers.** Caregivers report that finding the right balance between freedom and restraint can be challenging. Too much freedom results in unsafe behavior, while too many limitations increase boredom and agitation. This practical how-to guide shares how other caregivers have adapted their homes to increase their loved one's ability to engage safely in daily activities.

**Using the guide.** Read the entire guide for tips on Alzheimer-friendly features throughout the house, or go right to the topic with which you are currently struggling. For example, if your loved one is refusing to bathe, read the Bathroom section and test out some of the recommended suggestions. Routine and familiarity are important, so you will be more successful if you make changes slowly, a few at a time. The key to continued success is to re-evaluate on a regular basis. Is the solution still working or have your loved one's needs and behavior changed?

**Resources.** A resource section is included at the end of this guide to help you locate recommended products.

Helping a person with AD remain at home is an admirable task. It is our hope that these caregiver tips and resources will improve the well-being and independence of your loved one and lighten your load in caring for a person with AD.

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## General Safety – Indoors and Outdoors

### Stairs

- Install handrails on both sides. This makes climbing easier because people can use both arms to help pull themselves up the stairs or, in the case of one-sided weakness, just use the good side.
- Because many individuals have problems with depth perception, mark the edges of steps with a 1 to 2 inch strip of bright paint or reflective tape, especially the bottom step, where many falls occur.
- Install a door or a sturdy gate with a lock (e.g., wrought iron) on any dangerous stairs. It should be higher than the loved one's waist. Children's gates can be dangerous -- as a loved one can fall attempting to climb over the gate.
- A wheelchair lift or a ramp may be needed in the later stages of AD.

### Doors

- Place brightly colored decals at eye level on all glass doors to prevent your loved one from walking into them.
- For apartment dwellers, hang a personalized item on the door to help your loved one recognize his/her apartment door. Images that connect a person to the past, however, are highly individual. For example, one individual may recognize a personal portrait from his/her younger days, and another person may recognize a grandson's photograph. A sign with the person's name on it, in large bold type, may also be effective. Whatever item is used, make sure it is large enough to be seen from a distance. Note that some individuals, afraid that the item may be stolen, may not want items to be hung on the door.

### Door Locks, Alarms, and Wandering

The Alzheimer's Association states that nearly 60% of people with AD will wander during the course of their disease. To help prevent a loved one from leaving home without an escort and getting lost:

- Install locks unusually high or low on the door; they will not be as noticeable in these locations. No occupant, however, should be locked in a house alone because of the possibility of a fire. Moreover, locking a person in a single room or in the home when no one else is there can create extreme agitation if the person feels trapped.
- Install a keypad lock that requires the user to enter a numbered code. This type of lock is harder to operate than the familiar lock and key.

- Install a musical alarm so you are alerted whenever your loved one is attempting to leave the house.
- Disguise the front door with a mural or drape on the inside. However, if your loved one has lived in the home for a long time, this may not be an effective solution, for he/she may still remember the door's location. Securing the door with locks may be more effective.
- An identification bracelet should be worn at all times, especially in the late stages of AD. Consider enrolling your loved one in the Alzheimer's Association Safe Return Program, which helps identify individuals who have wandered off and become lost. The person who finds the lost individual can call the toll-free number located on his/her ID bracelet.

### **Windows**

- Cover the windows at night since reflections may be disturbing. For example, your loved one may perceive his/her own image as a stranger.
- Install safety guards in windows so they can only be opened 6 to 8 inches.

### **Interior and Exterior Walking Paths**

- Being able to walk freely is vital to the well-being of persons with AD, especially for those who pace. Make sure that there is a clear walking path in the home and in the garden (level surfaces are best). Some caregivers even remove walls in-between rooms to enable a loved one to walk in a continuous loop from room to room.
- The garden may need a high, secure fence (not climbable) so the person does not wander off and get lost.
- Check with a local nursery to verify that no plants are growing in the garden that might be poisonous if ingested.
- Fence off all ponds or pools, no matter how shallow.
- Limit access to power tools, such as drill and saws, and large equipment, such as lawnmowers and snow blowers.

## Seating and Tables

- Replace seating that is deep or low. Chair arms that extend to the front edge of the seat are easier to get into and out of.
- Remove rocking chairs -- they are hard to get out of and can easily tip.
- Motorized, lift-up chairs should only be used with supervision. The controls that recline or lift the chair to a standing position are too complex for a person with AD to operate. A fall could occur when a person attempts to climb out of the chair that is in the reclining position.
- If your loved one is incontinent -- along with toilet reminders every 2 hours -- consider using fabric pads that blend in with the upholstery's seating. Available in colors, they also have a vinyl waterproof backing and are machine washable. This type of pad may not provoke the embarrassment or shame that can occur with regular incontinence pads.
- Remove low furniture, especially glass tables, that your loved one might trip over or bump into.
- Put soft corner guards on sharp edges of furniture to prevent injury.

## Lighting

- Create an even level of lighting. Dark areas and uneven lighting can be frightening to a person with AD. Dim lighting is also a contributor to falls. Add extra lighting in all dim areas, including the foyer, front porch, areas between rooms, stairways, and bathrooms.
- Reduce bright light, glare, and strong shadows. Cover windows with blinds, shades, or sheer draperies to block bright sunlight. Avoid using bare light bulbs or clear "decorator" bulbs without shades. Remove or place fabric over glass-topped or highly polished furniture.

## Flooring

Many persons with AD have difficulty with gait and balance. Moreover, due to problems with depth perception, they may not see objects on the floors like doorsills and cords. The following suggestions can help reduce the risk of a fall.

- Remove area carpets or throw rugs, especially if your loved one has a shuffling gait or uses a walker.

- When rugs or carpeting cannot be eliminated:
  - Place non-skid padding under rugs or secure rugs to floor with double-sided tape. Area carpets without padding can easily buckle underneath when walked on, causing a person to slip and fall.
  - Repair or replace torn carpet as a foot, cane, or walker can easily get caught.
- Use only matte, non-shiny finishes on the floor.
- Doorsills can be tripping hazards. Remove whenever possible.
- Carpets with strong patterns may need to be removed if your loved one mistakes patterns for frightening images. For example, swirling patterns may be perceived as snakes.
- Checkerboard tile, dark carpet borders, or floor mats may be perceived as holes in the floor and increases fall risk. Remove if loved attempts to step over a “hole.”

### **Activity Areas**

People with AD who stay involved in activities have greater feelings of well-being. Provide a safe and comforting area, away from distracting noise, for engaging in favorite activities. As your loved one may no longer be able to initiate activities, set up the materials beforehand. Lay out the music books, gardening tools, or salad ingredients. Caregivers agree that shorter activity periods are better than longer ones. Repetitious and familiar chores (i.e., folding laundry, setting the table, washing the family car) can be very therapeutic in the late stages of the disease. The following therapeutic activities have been shown to reduce problem behaviors in people with AD:

- Playing favorite songs (i.e., Tony Bennett, Frank Sinatra, church music)
- One-on-one interaction, including special “respite” video tapes (see resources) designed for person’s with AD
- Playing videotapes of family members
- Walking and light exercise
- Familiar activities, including painting, gardening, and woodworking
- Visits with pets
- Visits with children

Note that some individuals become extremely agitated when watching violence on TV because they cannot distinguish television programming from reality. Careful monitoring of programming is crucial.

## The Kitchen – Cooking and Dining

The kitchen can be a familiar and comfortable place for many individuals -- and a great source of activities. Fire and burn risks or the threat of food poisoning, however, calls for special attention to safety. The following safety measures have helped many caregivers make the kitchen a more relaxed and useable area.

### Cooking Area

- Place a “Very Hot” sticker in large bright red letters on the toaster, toaster oven, and oven door.
- **For a gas stove**
  - Turn the gas temporarily off. Hire an electrician to install a turn on/turn off valve on the stove’s gas line. Even if your loved one turns the stove’s knobs, no gas will be emitted because the valve on the gas pipe must first be turned on.
  - Turn the gas permanently off.
  - Install child-proof stove knob covers.
- **For an electric stove**
  - Remove the circuit breaker after each use.
  - Hire an electrician to install a separate wall switch (hidden in a cabinet) to operate the stove’s on/off feature. The oven controls will only work after the switch is flipped.
  - Install a special timer that automatically turns the stove off after a set period of time.
  - Install child-proof stove knob covers.
- Unplugging appliances and installing safety covers over outlets will keep loved ones from plugging appliances back in.
- Purchase a kettle that whistles when the water is boiling or an electric kettle with an automatic shut-off. (Please note that your loved one may have difficulty operating the electric kettle.)
- Keep a fire extinguisher nearby and learn how to use it.
- Keep an armchair by the kitchen table or pullout board so your loved one can sit and participate as much as possible. Scooping melon balls, cutting up bananas, or simply folding napkins can keep a person engaged and a part of daily activities.

## Sink Area

- To avoid overflow accidents, remove the plug or install automatically-timed faucets that turn off after a set time.
- Since people with AD may place objects or their own hands in the garbage disposal, camouflage the switch, relocate it to a remote location, or disconnect it entirely.
- Wrap red plumber's tape around the hot water faucet.
- Set the hot water heater to 120 degrees or install an anti-scald valve in your faucet, which automatically turns the water off when it reaches scalding temperatures.

## Storage and Refrigeration

- Use text and pictures on the outside of the cabinets to remind your loved one what is stored behind closed doors.
- Install safety latches on cabinets and drawers where cleaning supplies, medications, knives, and other potentially dangerous items are stored.
- For those who eat continuously or eat harmful substances like raw chicken or vinegar, put a lock on the refrigerator/freezer.
- Clean out the refrigerator regularly and discard inedible food. Keep foods that are safe to eat in the front of the refrigerator so they can be easily seen.

## Dining

- As people with AD are easily distracted, a calm well-lit environment helps focus attention on eating. If necessary, place the person's chair away from the window, facing a wall. Soft relaxing music can help set a pleasant mood.
- To avoid spills, position your loved one as close to the table as possible. Bibs are also helpful in keeping clothing clean. Your loved one may more readily accept a bib in a vinylized colorful fabric than a standard children's style bib.
- If your loved one struggles with utensils, serve food in portions that can be easily eaten with fingers, such as potato wedges, small chicken patties, fish sticks, and sliced vegetables and fruits.
- Failing appetites may be improved by adding flavors, such as a sweet and sour sauce, to main dishes.
- Persons with AD may get overwhelmed with large portions if they feel they must eat all the food. Serve small portions and, if necessary, serve one course at a time.

- People with AD may not be able to detect when food or beverages are dangerously hot. To avoid burns, check temperature before serving. Add ice to hot coffee or tea.
- Allow plenty of time for a meal. Hurrying a person with AD can cause agitation.

### **Tableware**

- To keep dishes from sliding, use a non-slip place mat with traction on both sides so that both the plate and the mat will stay put.
- Use solid colored plates, for patterns can be distracting.
- High rims on plates or bowls help keep the food from spilling onto the tabletop.
- Use straws or two-handled cups with lids to make drinking easier.
- Choose strong, contrasting colors to help utensils stand out against the tabletop or placemat.
- Large handled utensils are easier to grasp than standard utensils.
- If a loved one is not eating, cueing may be needed. Place the utensil in your loved one's hand, slowly give step-by-step instructions, and demonstrate the sequence of action by lifting the utensil from plate to mouth. Spoons are easier to use than forks.
- If your loved one has low vision, use a variety of colored dishes, depending on the food you are serving. For example, mashed potatoes are easier to see against a dark blue plate than a white one.

## The Bathroom – Bathing, Toileting and Grooming

For a person with AD, maintaining personal hygiene can be a challenge. Bathing in particular can be a dangerous activity, and many resist help from caregivers. Research shows, however, that when caregivers understand their loved one's special needs and adapt the space accordingly, independence and well-being increase.

Special Note: If you are considering a renovation, plan a large bathroom with a walk in-wheel-in shower. In the later stages of the disease, a wheelchair is necessary, along with a great deal of caregiver assistance. Therefore a 5-foot turning radius is necessary, plus space for the caretaker to move about easily.

### Finding and Getting into the Bathroom

- Leave the bathroom door open when not in use and keep the light on, even during the day. Use automatic nightlights in the evening.
- Tape a picture of a toilet on the door outside, along with the words “Toilet” to act as a memory aide. Please note that your loved one may not accept this for aesthetic reasons.
- Remove the locks on bathroom doors to prevent the person from accidentally locking himself or herself in.
- Install a “privacy” pushbutton lock. This type of lock, inset into a doorknob, locks the door from the inside when the button is pushed. In case of an emergency, however, it can be opened from the outside with a screwdriver.
- Rehinge the door to open into the bedroom or hallway, not into the bathroom. This allows easy access into the bathroom if your loved one falls on the bathroom floor.
- If the doorway is too narrow, replace the door and the inside door trim with a curtain. Leave the curtain open when the bathroom is not in use.
- If the floor between the bedroom and the bathroom is wooden, purchase glow-in-the-dark paper and make footprint cutouts. Paste the cutouts on the floor to depict the pathway from the bed to the bathroom.

### Bathing: Setting the Mood

- Have everything you need before bathing or showering the person (soap, razors, towels, etc.).
- Playing soft, soothing music before the person enters the room may help reduce anxiety. Also, fragrances such as lemon, lavender, or pine can help create a relaxing atmosphere.
- Consider substituting words for “bath.” For example, “Let’s *freshen up* before lunch today.”
- Since persons with AD can be easily startled, move slowly and tell them what is going to happen, step-by-step. Speak softly, using simple sentences.
- To help your loved one participate, soap the washcloth, put it in his/her hand, and gently mention where to begin washing. You may need to slowly move his/her hand to start washing activity.
- For individuals who require privacy, use a special bathing outfit that shields their private areas but allows access for cleaning (e.g., Velcro bib and wrap-around skirt).
- If your loved one is sensitive to the cold, warm up the room beforehand and keep extra towels and a terrycloth robe nearby.

### Bathing Area

- **A handheld showerhead**, with an 80-inch long hose that allows easy access to back areas, can make personal hygiene easier. Many people with AD get upset when water flows directly onto their face. A handheld showerhead allows the water flow to be directed away from the face to the desired area. If your loved one still resists a hair wash, try a “no-rinse shampoo” product that gets hair clean without rinsing.
- **A shower stool or chair** allows a person to sit down, reducing fatigue. Chairs with backs are more comfortable to users, but some caregivers prefer stools for easier access to the back.
- **A transfer bench allows** the user to enter the tub by sliding across the bench instead of stepping over the tub wall. For a person with limited movement, consider a model with a sliding seat.
- **Grab bars** offer a hand support while getting in and out of the bathtub.
- **Nonskid bath mats** or strips placed close together reduce the risk of the user slipping in the tub.

- **To avoid burns:**
  - Change the settings on the water heater to 120 degrees or to the low setting, depending on your water heater, or
  - Install inexpensive anti-scald controls to the faucets and showerhead
  - Wrap red tape around hot water faucets
- **Overflowing sinks**
  - Remove plugs
  - Install new faucets with push-handle controls that only work when pushed on.

### Toileting

- To help your loved one get on and off the toilet more easily
  - Add a raised toilet seat that has attachable side arms or
  - Bolt a “toilet safety frame” to the toilet. This frame has grab bars on both sides and provides security and stability while getting on or off the toilet.
- Outline the toilet tissue holder in colorful tape to make it easier to locate.
- When walking to the bathroom is a problem, a bedside commode or urinal may be necessary, especially at nighttime.
- Add an additional commode or bathroom on the first floor so the toilet can be easily reached from any part of the home.
- Some individuals use the wastebasket instead of the toilet due to its similar shape. In this situation, remove the wastebasket. Consider tinting the toilet water to help improve aim.

### Sink Area

- People with AD may not be able to recognize themselves in the mirror, and perceive their own image as that of a stranger. In this case, cover the mirror with a cloth or remove the mirror.
- Lock up or remove medications, lotions, and other possible irritants, to a safe location.













