

Home Safety First

Written by Donna D. Chandler

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“I never thought I'd be childproofing our house again at age 67, but that's exactly what I found myself doing—only this time for my wife instead of our kids. The toughest part was finding the balance between keeping her safe and making her feel like a prisoner in her own home.” — Frank, 67, caring for his wife with Alzheimer's disease

Safety concerns are among the most stress-inducing aspects of dementia care. The challenge lies in creating an environment that minimizes risks while preserving dignity and some measure of independence. The first chapter provides practical guidance for addressing common safety issues while maintaining quality of life.



Home Safety Assessments and Modifications

A systematic approach to home safety can prevent many accidents before they happen:

Room-by-Room Assessment

Kitchen

Fire risks:

Automatic shut-off devices for stove/oven

Remove knobs when not in use

Disable gas stoves or add safety valves

Microwave alternatives for heating food

Sharp objects:

Secure knife blocks

Remove or lock up other sharp tools

Consider monitoring access to kitchen during later stages

Food safety:

Regular refrigerator checks for spoiled food

Childproof locks on cleaning supply cabinets

Remove toxic plants

Consider disconnecting garbage disposal

Bathroom

Fall prevention:

Non-slip mats in tub/shower

Grab bars properly installed (not towel racks)

Shower chair or bath bench

Raised toilet seat with handles

Single-lever faucets

Scalding prevention:

Set water heater to 120°F (49°C) maximum

Anti-scald devices on faucets

Color-coded hot/cold indicators

Other hazards:

Lock up medications, razors, electric appliances

Remove door locks or ensure they can be unlocked from outside

Consider flood prevention devices

Bedroom

Fall prevention:

- Clear pathways to bathroom
- Night lights with motion sensors
- Bed at appropriate height (knees bend at 90° when sitting)
- Bed rails if appropriate (consult with healthcare provider)

Closet organization:

- Simplify clothing choices
- Remove access to unnecessary items
- Consider locks for certain seasons of clothing



Living Areas

Trip hazards:

Remove or secure throw rugs

Tape down or remove electrical cords

Clear pathways between frequently used areas

Remove or secure unstable furniture

Fall prevention:

Adequate lighting, especially at transitions between rooms

Furniture arranged to provide stability supports when walking

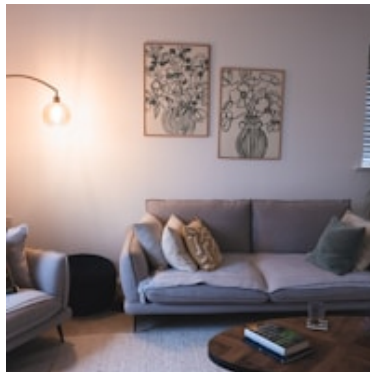
Contrast colors between walls and floors

Other hazards:

Secure bookcases and tall furniture to walls

Remove or secure objects that could be mistaken for food

Simplify remote controls and electronics





Garage, Basement, and Outdoor Areas

- Restrict access to potentially dangerous areas
- Secure tools, chemicals, and machinery
- Mark stairs with bright tape on edges
- Ensure adequate outdoor lighting
- Maintain walkways to prevent trips and falls
- Secure pools or water features with locked fences

Progressive Modifications

Safety needs evolve as dementia progresses. Consider implementing modifications in phases:

Early stage: Focus on prevention of major hazards (fire, falls, poisoning)

Middle stage: Add visual cues, simplify environment, secure more items

Late stage: Maximize supervision, may need to restrict access to certain areas

Expert Insight:

“I recommend that caregivers do a safety assessment from a kneeling position—literally get down to eye level and look at the environment from a new perspective. You'll notice potential hazards that aren't visible from your usual height: loose cords, sharp edges on furniture, objects that might look like food but aren't. This different perspective can prevent many accidents. — Occupational Therapist specializing in home safe”



Preventing Wandering

Wandering is one of the most dangerous behaviors associated with dementia, affecting up to 60% of people with the condition at some point:

Understanding Wandering Behavior

Wandering isn't random—it's typically triggered by:

Purpose-driven goals:

Looking for something, someone, or somewhere

Basic needs:

Hunger, thirst, need to use bathroom, discomfort

Stress or overstimulation

Feeling anxious, confused, or overwhelmed

Boredom or restlessness:

Need for activity or exercise

Following old routines:

Attempting to go to work, previous home, etc.

Side effects of medication:

Restlessness or agitation

Time confusion:

“Sundowning” or day/night reversal



Preventive Strategies

01 Address underlying needs:

- o Establish regular toileting schedule**
 - o Provide adequate food and hydration**
 - o Ensure comfortable temperature**
 - o Manage pain effectively**
 - o Create structured daily activities**
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02 Modify the environment:

- o Camouflage exits with curtains or removable wall murals**
 - o Place STOP signs or “Do Not Enter” signs on doors**
 - o Install door alarms or chimes**
 - o Use childproof door knob covers**
 - o Consider stable half-doors in some areas**
 - o Create a safe walking path within the home or secure yard**
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03 Identification precautions:

- o MedicAlert + Alzheimer's Association Safe Return program**
 - o GPS tracking devices (watches, shoe inserts, pendants)**
 - o ID bracelet with name and phone number**
 - o Sew identification into clothing**
 - o Current photo and updated physical description on hand**
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04 Community awareness:

- o Alert trusted neighbors**
 - o Provide your contact information to nearby businesses**
 - o Inform local police department of wandering risk**
 - o Create a “wandering response kit” with photo, description, medication list**
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Caregiver Spotlight: Victor, 42

“My mother was constantly trying to 'go home' despite already being in her home of 40 years. I discovered she meant her childhood home. Instead of repeatedly correcting her, I created a dedicated 'reminiscence corner' with photos of her childhood home and neighborhood. When she gets restless, I guide her to this space and look through the photos with her. The familiar images seem to satisfy whatever she's searching for, and her wandering attempts have decreased dramatically”

Home Safety Modifications: Small Changes That Make a Big Difference

As someone taking care of a spouse with dementia, you've probably noticed that your home—once a comfortable, familiar space—now presents unexpected challenges. The good news? You don't need massive renovations or expensive equipment to make your home safer. Let's talk about some straightforward modifications that can significantly reduce risks while preserving independence and dignity.

Start with the Basics: Lighting and Contrast

Poor vision and perception changes often accompany dementia, making adequate lighting crucial. Replace dim bulbs with brighter ones, especially in hallways, stairwells, and bathrooms. Consider motion-activated night lights to help with those middle-of-the-night bathroom trips—they've saved me from countless stubbed toes and worse.

Color contrast makes a remarkable difference, too. A dark toilet seat on a white toilet, colored tape marking the edges of steps, or brightly colored dishes against solid placemats help your loved one distinguish between objects and surfaces. These simple changes cost little but provide immediate visual cues that can prevent falls and confusion.

Remove the Trip Hazards

Take a walk through your home and look down. Those throw rugs you've had for years? They're now potential trip hazards. The extension cord running across the living room? A fall waiting to happen. Clearing pathways throughout your home is one of the most effective safety measures you can implement today.

Secure necessary cords along walls, remove or tape down area rugs, and rearrange furniture to create wider walkways. Remember, your spouse may develop an unsteady gait as dementia progresses, so the more open space to navigate, the better.

Bathroom Modifications That Actually Help

The bathroom often becomes “hazard central” in homes, but a few inexpensive additions can dramatically improve safety:

- Grab bars near the toilet and in the shower (properly installed into studs, not just suction-cupped)
- A shower chair or bench for sitting while bathing
- Non-slip mats both in the shower and on the bathroom floor
- A handheld showerhead that makes seated bathing easier

Don't wait until after a fall to make these changes. Most can be installed in an afternoon with basic tools, or you can hire a handyman for a couple of hours if you're not comfortable with the installation.



Kitchen Safety Simplified

The kitchen presents unique challenges, especially if your spouse still wants to participate in meal preparation. Consider these practical modifications:

- Install stove knob covers or simply remove knobs when not in use
- Add childproof locks to cabinets containing cleaning supplies or sharp objects
- Replace glass dishes with lightweight, unbreakable alternatives
- Label cabinets with simple pictures of their contents

Remember, maintaining a sense of normalcy and independence is important. These modifications allow continued participation in daily activities while reducing risk.

Door and Window Security

As dementia progresses, wandering becomes a concern for many caregivers. Simple door alarms (available at most hardware stores) can alert you if exterior doors open. Consider installing locks higher or lower on doors—places outside your spouse's normal line of sight

For windows, childproof locks can prevent unexpected exits while still allowing you to open windows for fresh air. Some caregivers find that a simple bell on doors provides enough warning without causing anxiety.



Technology That Actually Helps

You don't need a fully automated smart home to benefit from technology. Consider:

- Medication dispensers with alarms for reminder times
- Automatic shut-off devices for appliances like coffee makers
- Motion sensors that trigger lights in key areas
- A basic video doorbell to monitor front door activity

Start with one device that addresses your most immediate concern rather than trying to implement everything at once.

The Power of Routine and Visual Cues

Not all safety modifications involve physical changes to your home. Establishing consistent routines can be equally effective.

- Post a daily schedule in a prominent location.
- Use simple signs with both words and pictures on bathroom and bedroom doors
- Place important items like glasses, hearing aids, or wallets in the same spot every day.

These visual and routine-based cues provide the predictability that helps someone with dementia navigate their environment more confidently.

When to Call in Reinforcements

While many modifications can be DIY projects, know when to seek professional help.

If your spouse has specific mobility challenges, a consultation with an occupational therapist can provide customized recommendations

For electrical modifications or installing grab bars, hiring a professional ensures these crucial safety features are properly installed.

Many communities offer home safety assessments specifically for dementia care through local aging services. These assessments are often free or low-cost and can identify risks you might not notice because you're too accustomed to your home's layout.

Final Thoughts

The goal of home modifications isn't to create an institutional environment but to maintain a comfortable home that supports both of you through this journey.

Each small change you implement is an act of care that reduces your stress and helps preserve your spouse's dignity and independence.

Remember, you don't have to tackle everything at once. Start with modifications addressing your most immediate concerns, then gradually implement others as needed

The most effective safety plan is one that evolves alongside your caregiving journey.

