

Daily Union Article

Saturday, August 4, 2018

Title: Alzheimer 's Disease & Safe Living

Many of us know of the safety precautions we need to make as we age in our homes: remove throw rugs, avoid chairs with wheels, keep steps clear of clutter, switch out standard doorknobs with lever handles, add grab bars in your bathroom to name a few.

But what about the safety precautions needed for those in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease? While the standard safety precautions still apply, incorporating additional safety practices might be warranted if working with an Alzheimer's patient.

The National Institute on Aging provides a wide variety of resources regarding safety for seniors. As part of their Alzheimer's Caregiving series, they offer these home safety recommendations for homes with Alzheimer's residents.

Phone Safety: Make a list of emergency phone numbers and the home's address to place near all phones. If the resident solely uses a cell phone, you might need to consider how you can include this list in their wallet or purse for their easy access without compromising their safety.

Use an answering machine in the home and set it to turn on after the fewest number of rings possible. All elders are prone to being victimized by telephone scammers. A person with Alzheimer's disease is at a higher risk due to the effects of the disease. By setting the answering machine to pick up with minimal rings, the resident is more likely to let the machine take a message if the caller chooses to leave one. Often scammers will NOT bother to leave a message. Additionally, turn ringers on low to avoid distraction and confusion. I have noticed that my aunt, who is in the early stages of Alzheimer's, gets confused when the phone rings. She struggles to distinguish the sound from other similar sounds. It is difficult for her to know if her land line is ringing, her cell phone is ringing, or someone is ringing the doorbell to her home. By changing the tones and volume, her confusion has been minimized.

Fire Safety: Install smoke alarms and carbon monoxide (CO₂) detectors in or near the kitchen and all sleeping areas. Check them monthly to make sure they are functioning correctly and that the batteries are still good.

Remove any flammable or volatile compounds stored near gas appliances. Keep these items in a cool and safe area away from anywhere a pilot light is in use.

Keep a small fire extinguisher near the cooking area in the kitchen. It is possible that a fire could start in the kitchen if a cooking pan is left unattended or mistakenly forgotten about.

Around the House Safety: Install secure locks on all outside doors and windows. Install alarms that will notify the caregiver when a door or window is opened. Hide a spare house key outside in case the person with Alzheimer's disease locks the caregiver out of the house.

Place lamps and appliances close to electrical outlets to avoid having extension cords in the walkways. If extension cords are a necessity, tack them to the baseboards of a room to avoid the risk of tripping. Use childproof plug covers for outlets that are not being used.

To deter the person with Alzheimer's from standing on or touching hot floor vents, radiators, or other heating devices, place red tape around them to signal their danger.

Make sure each room has adequate lighting. This reduces the risk of falls for elders and those with Alzheimer's disease. It also makes it easier for them to read or do handwork like puzzles and needlework. The use of a motion sensor night light makes it safer for them to use the bathroom at night, as well.

Keep stairwells safer by placing light switches at the top and the bottom of the stairs. You can also install step lights that illuminate steps for added safety. By installing handrail that extends beyond the first and last step, you are providing additional support for keeping balance on the stairs.

Lock it Up: Lock up all medications – both prescription and over-the-counter. Make sure the bottles are clearly labeled with the person's name, name of the medication, dosage frequency, drug strength, and expiration date. Use a pill box to help ensure correct dosage and frequency.

Keep all alcohol in a locked cabinet or out of reach of the person with Alzheimer's. Drinking alcohol can increase confusion.

Lock up power tools and machinery in the garage, basement, or workroom. Lock up toxic materials, such as paint, fertilizers, gasoline, or cleaning supplies that are often stored in these areas, as well.

Lock up all guns and other weapons. Install safety locks on guns or remove ammunition and firing pins. If possible, remove them from the home entirely.

Lock access to all garages, sheds, and basements if possible.

Perhaps not all of these modifications are necessary, but becoming aware of what steps can be taken to protect the health and wellbeing of your loved one offers an extra level of security for you and the safety your loved one deserves.

If you or an organization you belong to would like me to offer a program on Alzheimer's and home safety, or for more information about aging in place, contact me at the Geary County K-State Research and Extension Office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!