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Kitchen Safety for Seniors

Kitchens are one of the most dangerous areas of a home for seniors. There may be physical issues such as diminished balance, vision, and reflexes — or a senior may be suffering from Alzheimer's disease or another form of dementia.

Many accidents and falls occur in the kitchen due to: cooking fires, water, grease and spills on the floor, reaching for hard-to-reach objects, appliance injuries, even inappropriate objects placed in a microwave.

The senior, family members, and in-home caregivers should follow these kitchen safety tips:

- Survey the kitchen with a critical eye — what may seem perfectly harmless to you may be a potential threat to your loved one. Tackle the kitchen one layer at a time: move up from floors to lower cupboards, counter tops, appliances, and overhead cupboards.
- Have an electrician check the fuse box or circuit breakers to ensure that the wiring in the kitchen is done properly. Make sure no outlets or switches are unusually warm to the touch.
- Protect against electrical overload with ground fault circuit interrupters (GFCIs). Make sure all outlets and switches have cover plates, and that any extension cords are not overloaded.
- Make sure all electrical cords are covered or securely tacked down to prevent accidents. Keep cords out of the way of other appliances and keep them away from sinks and stove tops. Make sure cords don't dangle over the edge of the counter or lie on the floor, creating a potential fall hazard.
- Place socket covers over electrical sockets that are not in use. Unplug small appliances when not in use.
- Make sure any gas stove has an automatic shut-off feature, in case the pilot goes out. You can have someone from the gas company check this for you.
- Check to see that the kitchen ventilation system or range exhaust is functional.
- Make sure there is a working smoke detector in the kitchen, and check the batteries at least twice a year.
- Keep a fire extinguisher handy, and make sure the senior knows how to use it properly.
- Move items that are used most often out of the highest and lowest cabinets and shelves, and into easy-to-reach cabinets and drawers. Pull-out drawers for bottom cabinets also make it so that seniors do not need to bend over so much. Countertop heights should be lowered for seniors who have trouble bending, or who are in a wheelchair.
- Close all drawers and cabinets when not in use, to avoid bumping into them.
- Make sure any knives and sharp utensils are secure in their storage areas.
- Secure area rugs to the floor with double-stick tape to prevent falls.
- As for other fall hazards, spills should be cleaned up immediately, using nontoxic cleansers. Also, check the refrigerator for leaks that could create puddles, and eventually rot wood floors.
- Keep flammable liquids out of the kitchen and store in a safe location outside of the house.
- Keep an eye out for signs of roaches, ants, or vermin infestations. Hire an exterminator if needed.
- Once a week, go through food in the refrigerator and throw out anything that is expired. Go through pantry/cabinet items once a month.

While cooking:

- Seniors should work with adequate lighting over the sink, range, and countertop areas. You may want to install under-cabinet lighting to help with this. Also, add a night light.
- All pots and pan handles should be turned so they aren't hanging out over the edge of the stove and able to be tipped over. Use pots with handles on both sides as much as possible.
- Seniors must avoid wearing loose sleeves, which can easily catch fire. Suggest that he or she wear short sleeves, or fasten long sleeves back with elastic bands.

Fast Facts

Cooking fires are the most common cause of house fires and house injuries, according to the National Fire Protection Agency — so remind seniors to never leave the kitchen unattended while cooking.

- Make sure potholders and oven mitts are easy accessible, but located away from heat sources. Also, remove any towels or curtains that are hanging near the stove, where they may catch fire.

For seniors with dementia:

- Get rid of the “junk drawer”, as many seniors with Alzheimer's and various forms of dementia may eat matches, plastic, washers, and other objects.
- Think about disconnecting the garbage disposal.
- Install child-proof locks or latches to cupboards that contain knives, cooking utensils, and other objects that may break or cause injury.
- Use unbreakable dishes, when possible.
- Remember: Reminding a senior with cognitive issues to not place canned foods in the microwave or to be careful with knives is not enough. It's up to you to unplug the microwave and to place the kitchen knives in a secured drawer.

You may be rather hesitant to make such changes around the home because of being afraid of hurting the senior's feelings. However, stress the importance of safety whenever possible, and your loved one may appreciate your care and concern.

Comfort Keepers® can help. We care for your loved one as though we were caring for a member of our own family. We perform home safety assessments, make recommendations, and offer safety products for your loved one's home. Ask your local Comfort Keepers office for more information today.

References:

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