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How We Can Make Our Homes Age-Friendly

As part of SCI's vision to drive authentic conversations about quality-of-life for the elderly, we will publish posts throughout the year that focus on best-in-class organizations that are equally committed to a future of healthy and happy seniors.

For our first post, we worked with Doro AB to explore the significance of active aging at home. We examine the safety challenges that living at home might entail, and how to facilitate an elderly person's request to do so. We have also gathered some tips from various organizations about how we can make the homes and ultimately the daily lives of the elderly safer and more secure.

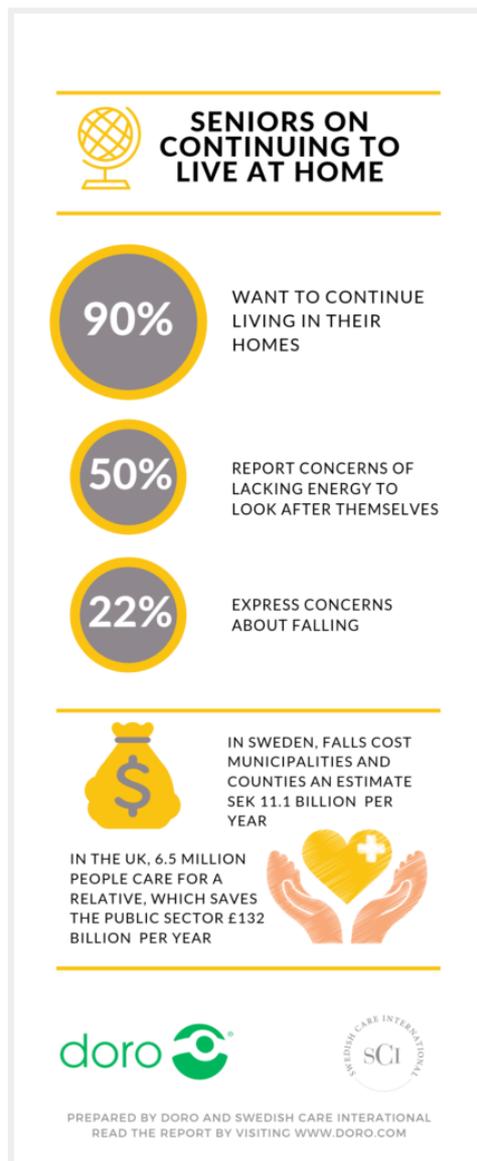


For the elderly, making the choice between living in their homes and moving to a retirement community or care home can be a difficult one. Research consistently shows the majority of older adults wish to continue living in their homes. According to one [study by the AARP](#) 90% of seniors (aged over 65) wish to continue living in their current residence.

Making the decision to age in place

There is a multitude of reasons why the elderly might choose to live at home. The meaning and experience of home are multidimensional – psychological, social, economic, material, and temporal (Despre’s and Lord, 2005). The home is more than the physical boundaries of brick and mortar. It’s a place of personalization, privacy, and refuge, socialization, and ownership, among many other things. Above all, the home is an important constituent of identity and self, and relocation often brings significant psychological and emotional loss (Hopkins and Dixon, 2006).

Despite the multiple incentives of continuing to live at home, it is often difficult to make a choice between doing that and moving into a care home. With increasing age, there can be a loss of bodily capacity and autonomy. Even if this is not always the case, there might be a fear of the lack of safety, security and the possibility of injury. In a study conducted by Doro of seniors living in France, Italy, Germany, the UK and Sweden, almost 50% expressed concerns about not having the energy to look after themselves and 22% between the ages of 55-85 years reported concerns about falling. When the research was re-run in groups of seniors aged between 66-85 and then 76-85, the percentages afraid of falling rose to 24% and 31% respectively ([click here](#) to read the full report). In the UK, 50% of people over the age of 80 falls at least once a year. Even minor falls can be dangerous for the elderly, with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), reporting [falls to be the leading cause of fatal and non-fatal injuries in Americans aged 65 and older](#).



Find the full report [here](#)

Supporting an elderly person's request to age in place

An elderly person's decision to live at home impacts the lives of his or her loved ones and primary caregivers. Such a decision can be accompanied by growing concerns about issues related to safety and security. Live-in caregivers are often a practical, albeit expensive solution, for families living away from the senior or those unequipped with skills to assist the elderly. Further, the senior may not wish to have a live-in caregiver as it may be perceived as an invasion of privacy and bodily autonomy. It also may be that the senior doesn't need assistance at all, in which case, the only concern is being able to ensure a quick and effective response in times of an emergency.

To facilitate safer home environments for the elderly, some practical recommendations from various sources have been compiled below:

1. Entryways

Even outside your house, it is important to ensure that an elderly person is in a safe environment. One way to do so is to ensure that the walkway leading up to your house does not have steps or any decorative elements which can be a safety hazard. At the point of entry into the house, ensure there is no step threshold. These are a common tripping hazard.

2. Bathroom/Bedroom

These are the most personal spaces in the house and need a lot of attention in order to ensure safety and comfort.

Bathroom

- Building a roll-in shower with multiple shower heads (height adjustable handheld showerhead and fixed)
- Lowering the bathroom sink and making sure there's proper knee clearance
- Installing an elevated toilet
- Installing grab bars

Bedroom

- Ensuring there's ample maneuvering clearance
- Building a walk-in closet with storage at differing heights
- Installing rocker light switches that are easier to turn on compared to a more common flip switch.

3. Kitchen

If the elderly person likes cooking and spends a lot of time in the kitchen, it is important to ensure that space is user-friendly. For example:

- Ensuring there's ample maneuvering space
- Varying the height of countertops
- Installing a sink with knee clearance
- Installing a raised dishwasher
- Lowering cooking surfaces
- Mounting a wall oven or microwave at reachable heights
- Making sure there's an abundance of storage space within reach
- Providing a desk/work area with knee clearance.



From left to right: A no-steps entryway, A senior-friendly bathroom, A senior-friendly kitchen. Source: Aging in Place

The **AARP** also suggests a few ways to make your home safer:

1. Use aging-friendly light switches

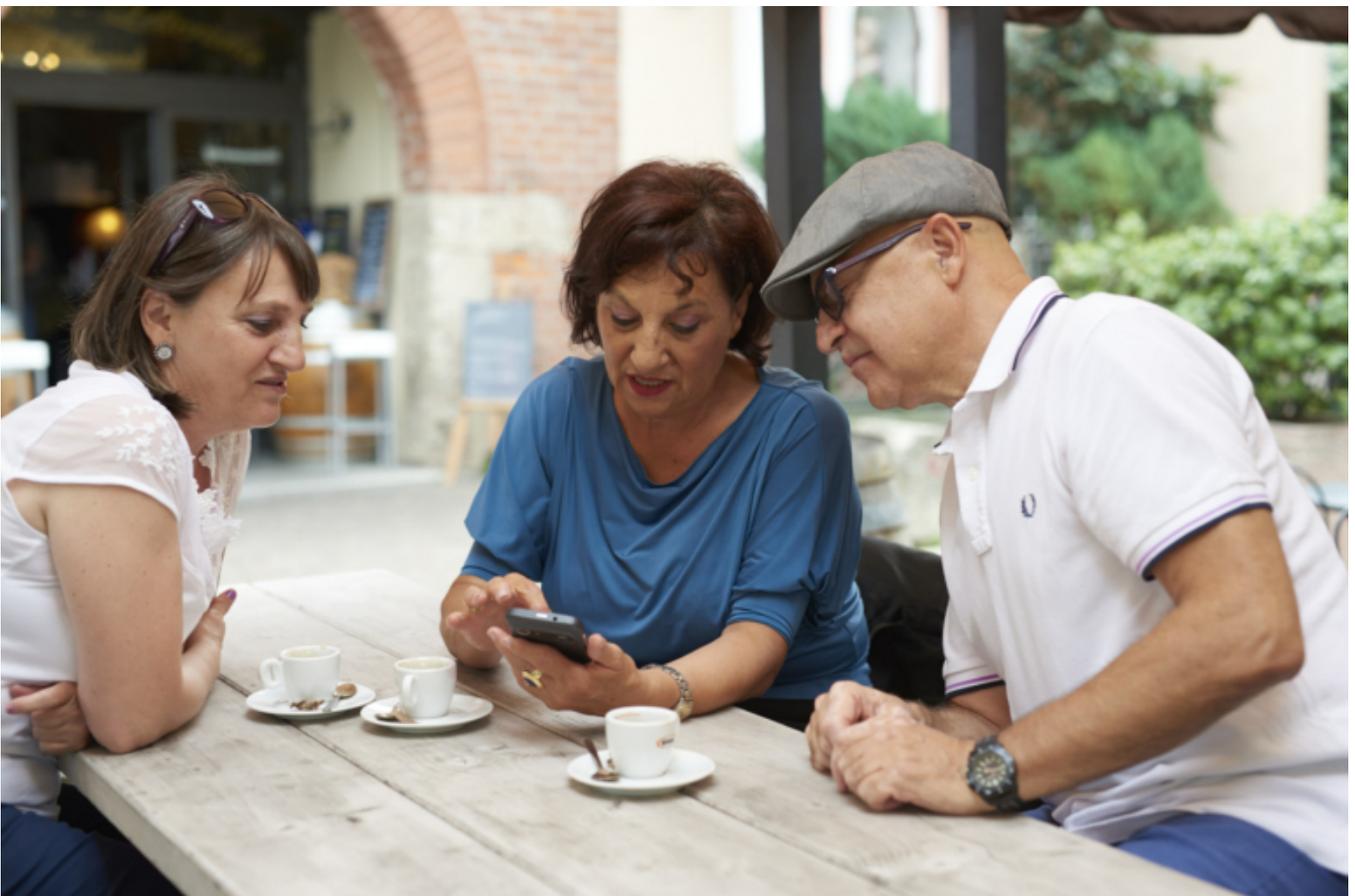
Paddle-style switches are better than a traditional toggle switch since they can be easily operated with a finger, knuckle or even an elbow.

2. Having plenty of light

It is always good to install as much lighting as possible, even it seems unnecessary because it is not always possible to predict which part of the house an older person might find difficult to navigate. Good natural lighting also aids in having a sense of space and time and maintaining one's circadian rhythm.

3. Wider is better than narrow

If at all possible, consider widening or constructing wider staircases in the home. This could facilitate two people in the staircase simultaneously, as well as accommodate a lift chair if required.



Safety can also be ensured via an efficient alarm system. Sweden's Doro AB, a provider in mobile phones for seniors, has such a service through a selection of their phones. With the click of a button, the user can alert his/her relatives (or even care services) about an emergency. Caregivers or medical professionals can then attend to the emergency as quickly as possible. The service is currently available only in Sweden and Norway and expanding to other European countries throughout 2019.

As American writer, Betty Friedan said, "aging is not lost youth but a new stage of opportunity and strength". With adequate safety measures, small changes can be a big step in achieving this new strength.

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March 7th, 2019 | Uncategorized

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