

Guidelines for Environmental Adaptations and Safety at Home

BY LAURA GITLIN

These tables, “Home Safety Environmental Checklist” and “Environmental Modifications for Specific Behaviors and Activities,” originally appeared in the very first issue of *Alzheimer’s Care Quarterly*, “Finding Home,” Winter 2000 (pages 52, 55, and 56).

These helpful suggestions are based on years on randomized, controlled trial research. We are grateful that the author, Laura Gitlin, will be sharing an updated version of this article and her research as a special feature in the fall 2007 (8:4) issue of *Alzheimer’s Care Today*.

TABLE 1.

Home Safety Environmental Checklist	
Environmental Feature	Potential Hazards
I. Specific Rooms and Areas	
1. Kitchens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inappropriate use of appliances (especially oven) • Access to medications • Access to sharp items (knives) • Improper storage of food • Poisonous plants • Access to alcohol, foods, condiments that may be harmful if eaten in large quantities
2. Stairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Objects in pathways • Lack of secure handrails (from top to bottom) • Stairs poorly lit at top or bottom • Steep, broken, uneven, or sloping steps • Safety gate at top of stairs
3. Bathrooms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Floor surfaces and tub slippery • Water temperature too hot • Medications and cleaning fluids accessible • Lack of grab bars
<i>(continues)</i>	

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TABLE 1.

Home Safety Environmental Checklist (Continued)	
Environmental Feature	Potential Hazards
II. Features throughout the Home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharp objects available • Lock on door
1. Lighting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Glare • Inadequate illumination • Pockets of shadows
2. Doors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to dangerous locations (eg, basement) • Ability to exit home • Height to threshold too high • Locks on bathroom doors • Location of locks
3. Electrical cords	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cords in pathways • Cords too close to heat, water, or oven • Cords in disrepair
4. Common household objects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to knives, scissors, razors, or other sharp and dangerous items • Access to breakables (glass tabletops, delicate items) • Access to medications • Access to firearms • Poisonous house plants (poinsetta, dieffenbachia)
5. Temperature control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too hot in summer • Too cold in winter
6. Floor conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tripping hazards (throw rugs, objects in pathways, frayed carpets, broken tiles) • Objects in pathways
7. Level of clutter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excessive number of objects in rooms • Excessive noise levels • Objects stored along baseboards or pathways • Excessive number of objects on countertops

TABLE 2.

Environmental Modifications for Specific Behaviors and Activities	
Problem Area	Potential Modifications
Wandering outside	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Place “stop” sign or “Authorized Personnel Only” on door leading to outside • Camouflage door/doorway with sheet, wall hanging, fabric curtain, or screen • Install dead bolt lock, slide bars, or extra locks at top and bottom • Install simple bells or alarms • Store keys out of sight • Enroll in Alzheimer’s Association Safe Return program • Place identification bracelet on person • Notify neighbors, local police • Keep copies of current photo available • Support the emotional need underlying the wandering attempt • Provide exercise and stimulation during day • Set up a safely proofed area for pacing and wandering in home or yard
Ascending or descending stairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Put away coat, boots, and other items used to go out • Install secure hand-rails • Paint narrow strip or place bright color duct tape at edge of each step • Remove all objects from stairs • Secure broken steps or loose carpeting on stairs • Illuminate stairway at all times • Eliminate shadows from stairways • Have person wear fitted shoes
Ambulating around home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arrange stable furniture to use as support to move around home • Maintain clear passageways • Remove distracting objects • Eliminate clutter • Widen doorways to make rooms easier to enter • Remove or lower thresholds • Double tape area rugs or remove throw rugs • Remove low furniture and glass table tops • Pad sharp corners of furniture • Install grab bars in appropriate places • Limit access to unsafe areas (basement, garage, junk drawers)
Toileting, bathing, and/or grooming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use grab bars for bathtub, toilet transfers • Use tub chair or hand hold shower hose for bathing • Use bathroom mats • Remove lock, place tape on lock, or change its location on bathroom door • Set temperature on hot water heater 120° or less

(continues)

TABLE 2.

Environmental Modifications for Specific Behaviors and Activities (Continued)	
Problem Area	Potential Modifications
Preparing meals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remove toxic substances (cleaning fluids, household detergents) and keep in locked cabinet • Group objects and label according to task • Remove unnecessary objects for tasks • Store medications, razors in locked cabinet • Add decals to sliding glass doors for visibility • Disable oven (remove knobs) and other appliances • Cover stove top with aluminum cover • Use safety locks to store dangerous items • Use signs (pictures or labels) to identify objects safe to use • Use small appliances with automatic shut off switches
Inability to respond to crisis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post emergency numbers by telephone • Use telephone with preprogrammed rapid dial numbers and train person to use • Place ID information in person's wallet • Notify neighbors • Install smoke detectors and regularly check batteries • Have copies of current photo available • Have person wear ID bracelet
Extreme agitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remove sharp objects (scissors, knives, fireplace equipment) from common living spaces • Remove breakable objects • Set up a quiet room with comfortable furniture for rest breaks • Remove small breakable objects