Good health is important to everyone, but as we grow older it takes on a special significance. Our enjoyment of life very much depends on staying independent and fairly fit. It is a great pity, and a waste, when anything happens to interfere with this. For many senior citizens, an accident at home does just that.

Having survived until later life, most of us feel that we are safety conscious. However, research shows that the ageing process can make everyday activities more risky. This can be for many different reasons - slower reaction times, worsening sight or mobility problems, for example, can all lead to accidents. These changes take place very gradually and we often don’t notice them at all until an accident happens.

This leaflet aims to put you in the picture about where risks lie and to give you the information you need to make safer choices.

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Staying active

Few people are as fit in later life as they were ten years earlier. However, it is important to stay active even if this just means going for a walk every day or doing a few simple exercises. Some people will be more energetic - attending keep fit classes or playing a sport. It is up to you to adjust to your own physical abilities whilst at the same time making sure that you remain as active and mobile as you can. There are many practical things you can do to make it safer to keep active.

- Good lighting can help prevent a fall, particularly on the stairs.
- Handrails on both sides of the stairs can make them easier to climb.
- If unsteadiness is a problem, sturdy shoes with ridged rubberised soles and non-slip heels will give you extra stability.
- Lifting heavy objects or bags of groceries can lead to a strained back. Try not to carry too much at once and try to get help with lifting heavy objects.
- If you tend to bump into things, think about rearranging your furniture so that you can move around more easily.
- Trailing flexes and rucked-up or fraying carpets can trip you up; keep the floor clear of these kinds of hazards.
- If you start wearing bifocal glasses, remember they can be unsettling to walk around in at first. Take special care, particularly on the stairs.
In the kitchen

Many accidents take place in the kitchen - particularly scalds, burns, and cuts. Here are some points to keep in mind.

- Make sure that there is a clear space near the sink and cooker so that you can put hot pans down safely.
- Place things you use every day within easy reach. Avoid stretching up to reach high shelves or bending down into low cupboards.
- An easy-to-operate tin opener can save a lot of trouble. If your grip is poor, a wall-mounted or electric opener can make things easier.
- Use a timer to help to remind you that you have left something cooking.
- Always remember to turn pan handles inwards, away from the front of the cooker.
- If you spill something on the floor clean it up immediately; it is all too easy to slip on a spill you were intending to wipe up later!
- If you have a gas cooker, check occasionally to make sure that the pilot light has not gone out.
In the bathroom

Here are some simple things you can do to make your bathroom safer.

- To avoid scalding, either run the cold water before the hot, or run the taps together. Always check the water temperature before getting into the bath. Showers should have a temperature selector or a cut-out device which automatically stops the water getting dangerously hot.

- A fitted carpet in the bathroom is safer than vinyl flooring and loose mats. There is much less risk of slipping.

- A non-slip mat in the bath and a well-placed grab rail can help you keep your balance when you are getting out of the bath.

- Always leave the bathroom door unlocked, in case of an emergency. If you have worries about getting in and out of the bath safely, find out about equipment that could help, such as a bath seat. The **Disabled Living Foundation** can advise you. A personal screech alarm, mobile phone or community alarm can also be handy. See page 10 for more information on community alarms.

- **Never** use mains-powered electrical appliances in the bathroom.
In the bedroom

It's easy to drop off to sleep forgetting that you've left the bedroom fire or an electric underblanket on, or to get up in a hurry and suddenly feel faint. It is surprising how many risks there can be in a place usually seen as safe!

Some tips for making your bedroom a safer place are listed below.

- Keep electric fires and heaters, or mobile heaters, well away from bedclothes, furniture and curtains.

- Electric blankets should be serviced regularly but even then they won't last forever. Check for danger signs such as frayed fabric, worn flex and scorch marks. It is important to switch off electric underblankets before you get into bed.

- Check whether your bed is the right height for you. When sitting on the edge, the soles of your feet should touch the floor and you should be able to stand up easily.

- Sometimes older people can feel faint when getting out of bed. You can avoid this by taking your time and sitting on the edge of the bed for a minute or so before standing up.

- It is easy to trip up when you first get out of bed; watch out for a loose dressing gown cord or sheets and bed covers trailing on the floor.

- Make sure that you can switch on the bedside lamp easily if you wake up in the night. A torch may also be helpful if you need to move around at night without disturbing other people.
Household jobs

It is easy to underestimate the amount of time and effort that some quite straightforward household jobs require. Try to be realistic about what you can manage; if you have any concerns, think about a different way of doing things, or ask for help.

- Household jobs are easier and safer if you take time to plan the work before you start. This includes checking you have all the tools you need to do the job.

- Think carefully before starting any job which involves using a ladder – would it be wise to ask someone to help you? If you do decide to use a ladder make sure it is standing at a safe angle, anchored at its base. A twelve-foot ladder against a wall should be three feet away at the bottom. Do not lean out too far from a ladder; move it if you need to get at a hard-to-reach spot.

- **Always** read the instructions carefully when using power tools and electric mowers, and follow them closely. Always use a power point fitted with a residual current device (RCD) as this will shut off the power if an electrical fault develops or if the cable is cut through.

- Take care with jobs where you have to raise your arms and tip your head back, such as cleaning windows and changing light bulbs. This sort of movement can make some people feel light-headed and dizzy. If this happens to you, avoid this sort of task and ask someone to help you.

- If you find it difficult to reach electric sockets at floor level you could have them moved to a better position. If you have difficulty grasping an electric plug, you can buy special ones fitted with a grip or handle.

- Make sure all chemical products, such as bleach, turps, caustic soda and weedkillers, are clearly labelled. Store them where children cannot get at them.